

“From that time on...”. Quick, where does this phrase come from? If you could not answer, ‘today’s passage, goofy pastor!’, then your short-term memory is as bad as MINE! (Now, what were we talking about?). Seriously though, for me this simple little ‘throw-away line’ is actually very important. For a couple of reasons.

First and foremost, these 4 simple words mark a distinct change in the preaching and teaching of Jesus. To this point much of his focus has been on the PUBLIC preaching of the Kingdom of God... both in the present and the future... which included many miracles that attest to His supernatural identity. But here Jesus is shifting from speaking to the crowds to training His DISCIPLES. And much more than his miracle-working nature, the Rabboni, the TEACHER, must instruct His students as to a deeper meaning of His life: that much more than coming to bring physical and mental healing, His mission is to suffer, die, and be raised from the dead. That without the Death and Resurrection... without the CROSS... Jesus’ life is not that much different than any number of human religious leaders (or secular, for that matter) whose life was dedicated to serving the downtrodden and disenfranchised.

Secondly, aside from a ‘big-picture’ shift in public to private instruction, this phrase also points back to what transpired right before. **‘From that time on’** can also relate to what happened immediately prior to Jesus’ ‘controversial’ reference to what the days to come would hold. Which is VERY important when you consider who the ‘star’ of that previous passage was: PETER!

It is in verse 16 of this same chapter that Peter correctly answers Jesus’ >>__question, **“Who do you say that I am?”** by saying, **“You are the Messiah (Christ), the Son of the living God.”** Peter gives the ‘right answer,’ the #1 response to what the ‘survey says’ who Jesus is. That ‘Messiah,’ the Christ, the ‘Son of the living God,’ who then goes on to say that the church will come to be built on him (Peter)... And **“the gates of hell will not prevail against (overcome) it.”**

And NOW... in this very next passage... Jesus calls Peter ‘Satan!’ A ‘hindrance’ to Christ. Jesus seemingly does a ‘180’ in his assessment of Peter... the Rock... moving from ‘the gates of hell’ to the one who opens those gates. In an instant, Peter goes from being very ‘right’ in the

eyes of his Lord, to being very wrong. Even in the very midst of being called to 'take up the cross' of Jesus.

And just WHY does our Lord respond so harshly? Because Peter is imposing his own human emotions and imperfect will on the perfect, if unfathomable, will of God. 'No, my Lord and Teacher! They can't treat you like that! That would make you too human. You ARE 'the Son of the living God,' for crying out loud! If they persecute you and kill you, it would be as though they were killing YHWH, our Almighty and everlasting God! This CAN'T happen!'

And you can't blame him. Peter loved Jesus. He couldn't bear the thought of his suffering and death. AND, also, what would that do to all of their *human* plans to restore the kingdom of God? This whole 'crucifixion' thing would mess up everything!

Sure it would. If it were a human plan. But this is GOD's plan. That in the end, HE WOULD be glorified, exalted as the name above all names. Jesus, by his passion (suffering) would show his 'COM-passion' for all mankind. By His death, He pays the price that only we should, but only he can. By His resurrection, Jesus demonstrates, once and for all, God's victory over sin and death. HIS plan. NOT ours. Jesus is God's 'right answer' for ALL of our 'wrong answers'...

And yet, we are no different than Paul. He shares with us those words from the gospel of Pogo: "We have met the enemy, and he is US!" Like him, we too, in a moment's time, can vacillate between 'right answers, and wrong answers.' Even as we are called to take up our own cross. We too can go all-too-quickly from being 'the Rock' on which the church is built, to a 'stone,' a 'stumbling block,' by which we can actually become a 'hindrance' to the cause of Christ.

(Side note: How many of you have ever been disturbed by Jesus calling Peter 'Satan?' If you're like me (I know, a stretch!), you might really struggle with 'Rocky' being put the same level as the 'prince of darkness.' What I believe our Lord is saying here is that just like Satan did his best to TEMPT Jesus in his time in the wilderness by trying to prey on his human pride, emotions, and will, so too did Peter 'tempt' Jesus to give in to human thought patterns. And I think that we ALL have a little 'devil' in us tempting us to listen to the voices of the world rather than the voice of Jesus...)

Sooo... how do we become more of a 'help' than a 'hindrance' to the work of Jesus? How can we be a better 'Rock' for others to build on, rather than a 'stumbling block' for others to trip on? Well, the words of today's passage from Romans help guide us in how to better give 'right answers'... to be better able to 'carry our cross'... (clearly a theme for today...)... and remain true to our faith.

Today's passage from Romans is one of the better 'statements of faith' in Scripture... or, perhaps, how to better MAKE a 'statement' about our 'faith.' Each verse could stand on its own as how to avoid making a 'wrong answer' in the manner in which our very lives 'preach the gospel.' Or, REFUTE it! That being said, however, you can breathe a big sigh of relief that we will NOT be going through it 'line by line.' I want to encourage you, perhaps later on this evening, or tomorrow during your 'NON-Labor day,' to go back and re-read Paul's words. If you need any incentive, perhaps considering the subtitle of this section in the NRSV... it is called "Marks of the True Christian." Wouldn't you like to know if your 'marks' as a 'Christian' were 'true'... or 'not-so-true'...?

There are a few that I would like to comment on, however. The first one is in the very first verse of the passage: ***"Let love be genuine."*** (Rom 12:9). It is also translated ***"Let love be without hypocrisy."*** That word 'hypocrisy' comes from the Greek 'hypocrites.' (Which is NOT translated 'Christians'... tho, if the shoe fits...) 'Hypocrites' were actors in Greek plays who would wear masks to take on different roles, hiding their true identity. How many of us put on 'masks' to hide our 'true identity' from others? We can go to great lengths to avoid admitting that we're not perfect, that we are broken sinners just like everyone else. And just as bad, we can also 'hide' our identity as Christians from others. Not wanting them to think we're some sort of 'Jesus freak.' We might do well to recall a statement by Jesus earlier in Matthew: ***"Whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father in heaven."*** (Mt. 10:33). OUCH...

Who Paul speaks of most in this passage are those whom we hide from NOT behind 'masks' of insecurities or self-doubts, but rather, those for whom we put up different 'barriers'... 'walls' of anger, fear, hatred, resentment. Those 'enemies, foreign and domestic,' who persecute you, who do all manner of evil against you. Those who we do not associate with because they

are 'lowly'... i.e., they are 'beneath' us. 'Beneath us' socially, economically, politically... or even *spiritually*. Or at least, we THINK so...

Paul encourages us to treat one another with **humility**... with **mercy**... and with **empathy**. He challenges us to **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."** (Rom 12:14). Oh, THAT's easy, right? Yet we are to 'HUMBLE ourselves in the sight of the Lord... and EACH OTHER... in the way we **"live in harmony with each other."** (v. 15). To live in such 'harmony' (think of the musical term in which different voices blend together to make something beautiful), we should **"not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are."** Remember, you can't spell... or live... the word 'humble' without 'U'...

We are also to bear that 'mark' of true Christianity called "MERCY." **"Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble..."** (v. 17). I can't read this word 'noble' without thinking of those positive character traits of >> Philippians 4:8: **"Finally brethren, whatever is things are true... noble... just... pure... good report... meditate on THESE things."** There is nothing 'noble' or 'positive' about "repaying evil for evil." Or, as we might call it, 'pay back.' You know... as in 'pay back is h***.' As humanly justifiable, and satisfying as it may be. Paul reminds us of an O.T. truth in Deuteronomy: **"Vengeance is mine... I will repay... says the Lord."** (32:35). Hmm... and this is coming from the OLD Testament, the home of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' Those words sure sound like something we'd expect Jesus to say. We should bear in mind that it is how we treat those who mis-treat us that is one of the truest indications of our Christian faith. Keyword: FORGIVENESS (closely related to the word 'mercy'...)

The third and final word from Paul I would leave you with is **empathy**. No matter that others persecute you, or mistreat you, or consider you an enemy... no matter WHO they are... the Great Apostle calls us to **"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep."** (v. 14). As Christians we must show 'empathy'... which is defined as "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another."

When we consider the 'tools' in our 'toolbox' of witnessing to others our Christian faith, those traits of 'understanding,' 'awareness,' 'sensitivity,' and 'experience' are some of the most useful ones. And we best demonstrate these when we 'rejoice and weep with others.'

This week a church member forwarded me an article by L.C. columnist Jim Beam dealing with the manner in which we... particularly Christians... do NOT necessarily do a good job in those areas of 'sensitivity' and 'understanding'. He quoted a letter to "The Advocate" newspaper in BR by a man named Jeremy White. While I did not agree with his broad stroke condemnation of "Christians," he did make a statement I found thought-provoking: *"In short, divine forgiveness, the linchpin of all Christianity — is entirely based on one thing: empathy."*

While I might take issue with the adjective 'entirely,' forgiveness is certainly at the core of the Gospel. Along with Jesus, who embodied 'empathy'; in the words of Hebrews, ***"Jesus understands every weakness of ours, because he was tempted in every way that we are. But he did not sin!"*** (4:15, CEV)

[As others... and indeed, our Lord Jesus... look at our lives to see the...]

As others... and indeed, our Lord Jesus Himself... look at our lives to see the genuineness of our faith, may they see in us humility... mercy... empathy. May we learn to lower the 'masks' that we can hide behind, so that others may see us, warts and all. May they see in us the same type of unconditional love that Jesus showed for us in his life... and death... and resurrection. Let us never forget that all of the 'right answers' we give come from God... the same God who loves us even when we, like Peter, give the 'wrong answers'...

"BONUS MATERIALS"

INTRO TO PRAYER CONCERNS: As we move from our time of offering to sharing in prayer concerns... times of living out our faith both within ourselves and outside these walls... I wanted to ask if anyone had looked very closely at the front cover of the bulletin. Do you know who that man and woman are? Members of the **Salvation Army**.

When I asked Jim Wright... who does SUCH a great job each and every week with the bulletin, none-the-least of which is the selection of bulletin covers... why he chose this one, he replied (and I quote): "the Salvation Army is the best example I can imagine of **mendicancy** in current culture... The purpose of mendicancy is the practice of poverty and humility for the benefit of others: "taking up the cross", if you will."

How many of you were familiar with the term 'mendicancy'? Or the noun form, 'Mendicant?' It is most often used with religious orders such as Carmelite or Franciscan, and is defined as "combining monastic life and outside religious activity and originally owning neither personal nor community property." From root word "BEGGAR".

(Gosh, that **JW** is SMART! Just doesn't ACT like it. No, I mean in a GOOD way!)

The reason I bring all this up is that in our life of PRAYER, one of the things that we should be praying for is to be more like members of the Salvation Army, or religious orders like the Franciscan or Carmelites. Those who take more seriously their 'vows' to follow Christ, being more willing to make sacrifices of our time, and our resources, in order to grow in our personal faith... while also engaging in 'outside religious activity'. Being a living, breathing, speaking and active witness in our families, our neighborhoods, in our work places... in grocery stores, banks, schools, nursing homes. That we should always remind others of just what it truly means to be a part of a CHURCH: "One beggar showing another beggar where to find something to eat."

And so, fellow beggars, I lift up before us now others who 'hunger and thirst'... who indeed may be 'begging' for healing, for hope, for peace... for the presence of Christ. The Lord Jesus Who sometimes comes in the form of broken and beautiful people like you and me.

CHARGE: The last line of the Romans passage summed up Paul's "Marks of a True Christian" in this way: **"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**(Rom. 12:21) As I read this, a very similar, more contemporary quote came to mind: **"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."** You may recognize this as having been spoken by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in the famous **"I Have a Dream"** speech that was delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to over 250,000 civil rights supporters during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963. Just last week we celebrated the 60th anniversary of that event...the speech becoming one of the most famous moments of the civil rights movement and among the most iconic speeches in American history.

Today, may we seek to remember not only the legacy of Dr. King, but how his words... and OURS... are to be rooted in Scripture. May we help to make his dream come true for all in our world who are hurting, mistreated, marginalized. In the way we treat one another, may we remember that 'darkness cannot drive out darkness... only light can do that.' May the true Light of the world, Jesus, shine in our lives... driving out hate with love. As you and I, in our everyday lives, seek to **"Overcome evil with good,"** we KNOW that we cannot do so alone. But only as the Spirit of the living God is above us to watch over us.... And all God's children said, "AMEN!"

Earlier we sang the first 4 verses of a song called "The Summons," that speaks both to Jesus' call to follow Him, as well as the ways we live out that call per Paul's admonitions in *Romans 12:9-21*. The 5th and final verse, unlike the first four in which God is speaking to us, has us replying to Him. I encourage you to join me in reading these together, as we 'charge' ourselves with these thoughts:

**"Lord, your summons echoes true When you but call my name.
Let me turn and follow you And never be the same.
In your company I'll go Where your love and footsteps show.
Thus I'll move and live and grow In you and you in me."**

INTRODUCTION TO FIRST HYMN: One of the most well-known stories in the OT... if not all of Scripture... is Moses and the burning bush. One of today's lectionary passages. Here is a portion of it: *There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.* ³ *Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.'* ⁴ *When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.'* ⁵ *Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.'* ⁶ *He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.'* *And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God."* (Exod. 3:2-6)

May this miraculous story of Moses' encounter of God be considered analogous to our own experience as the church. Here, may we see the glory of God ablaze, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in our worship. Here, in this 'burning bush' called a 'sanctuary,' We too, like Moses, are compelled to 'turn aside' from our daily lives to 'look at this great sight'... God alive and well in this place. Like Moses, "the place where we are standing is holy ground." And UNLIKE the great patriarch, we need not be 'afraid to look at God.' Rather than 'hide our face,' let us lift up heads, and our voices, as we stand to sing Glory to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And most especially, OUR God!

Please join me in singing Hymn #488, "The God of Abraham Praise"...

Question for Reflection: How can your life include a faithful response to Jesus' charge that his followers must "deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24)?

(The following is a paraphrase of Romans 12:9ff used in a Children's Message):

"Paul's Rules for Getting Along with People."

- Treat every person as a friend. (Especially those you don't know!)
- Always do what is right. (How to know? BIBLE!)
- Help people when they need your help.
- Pay attention to people's feelings. Laugh with those who are happy and comfort those who are sad.
- Do not act stuck-up or think you are smarter than you are.
- Ask God to help you to be good to people who give you trouble.
- Do not try to get even with people who are mean to you. Instead, treat them kindly. (Your kindness will make them ashamed of what they did.)