

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

SERMON THEME: "Marks of a Christian"

SERMON TEXT: Romans 12:9-21 (Read first)

Dear People of God,

Rome was founded during the time of Isaiah in the mid-700's B.C. By the time of the Apostle Paul it had become the greatest city in the world with in excess of a million inhabitants. As with most major cities of the world today, it had its rich and poor, and a mix of nationalities. It was one of the cosmopolitan originals, sophisticated, for the most part well educated, and as time would prove, not necessarily friendly toward Christians. The principle religion of the time was polytheism, the belief there are many gods, not just one.

Despite this, the Christian church in Rome was apparently quite sizeable, attesting to the power of the Gospel. It consisted of both Jews and Gentiles, but mostly Gentiles. Paul had never been there, but was eager to minister to the faithful, affirming their faith and adding depth and clarity to what they had been taught, hence this letter. We find here the most systematic and profound presentation of doctrine in the entire Bible!

Romans clearly distinguishes Gospel and Law. Paul sets the theme in chapter 1 by stating that "the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." He proceeds to make abundantly clear that the sinner is "justified freely by God's grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (3:24). This is followed by a lengthy and most detailed discussion of God's gift of righteousness to everyone who comes to Christ Jesus by faith; salvation is free, not earned by works! He shows how the good news of God's Son Jesus Christ is more than just facts to be believed; "For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and confesses with his lips..." (10:10).

Salvation is not merely the consent of the mind, or intellectual assent, but a very real involvement of the heart! To belong to Christ is to let the Spirit of Christ dwell within, to submit to Him in full surrender! This means living a different kind of life—

a life of righteousness befitting a person who has been saved from an eternal hell and now has the promise and hope of a greater glory to come!

This brings us to the words before us in chapter 12. Here Paul moves on to a number of practical exhortations for the true Christian to follow. Jews and Gentiles alike, in other words, all believers, are to bear the "Marks of a Christian". We were born a sinner like everyone else. We look like all other people. We attended, for the most part, the same educational institutions as other youth. Our houses look the same as our neighbor's and we drive the same cars on the same streets. We go to the same stores and doctors. We are citizens under the same political leadership. And more. But we who have heard and believed the Gospel are different! When Jesus truly lives in our hearts, we are not the same as those who deny Him. We who have been taught God's Law and obey it do not conduct our lives the same as our unbelieving neighbor. Peter said it well, describing followers of Christ as exiles, strangers to this sinful world! We are in it, but not of it! We are set apart, not better than anyone else, yet "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people..." (1 Peter 2:9).

In baptism we were not only joined with the Christ who died and rose again, but we were made members of His Body, the church. We have been empowered by the Holy Spirit, gifted to serve, enabled to sacrifice, and commissioned to share the good news of Jesus wherever and whenever we can!

To the man on the street we may look like anyone else, so what are some of the ways that prove we are redeemed by the blood of the sacrificial Lamb of God? How do, or should, we witness to what God has done to make us citizens of heaven, a spiritual people instead of carnal people? What are the "Marks of a Christian" that Jesus envisioned when He said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16)?

Depending on how you want to count them, our text lists at least 22 "Marks of a Christian". Let's take a look at them one by one. And as we do, examine yourself to see if you are doing, or not doing, as the words say. How do you and I measure up

by God's own standard based on Paul's words inspired by the Holy Spirit—words "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16)?

Verse 9: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good." We love as Jesus did, not just with words, but in sincere deeds. This speaks of *agape'* love, a self-sacrificing kind of love, a depth of caring that will not turn away from any opportunity to help or provide for another person, Christian or not. True love will not hesitate to rebuke any form of evil, because evil is always hurtful and ultimately destructive. We call people caught up in sin to repentance *because we love them*, whatever the sin, from murder to rape to thievery, identity theft, homosexuality or any other sin. We want everyone to experience the blessings of forgiveness, the joy of salvation, and have the peace we enjoy!

Verse 10: "Love one another with brotherly affection; outdo one another in showing honor." Jesus tells us to love even our enemies; He loved and died for everyone, even those who murdered Him! And it is when we count others as better than ourselves that we are truly humble. Jesus, in His human nature, "did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:7). Love everyone; be humble! Be like Jesus!

Verse 11: "Never be lacking in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord." This is the "acid test" which most of all distinguishes true Christians from those who are Christians in name only. The believer whose heart truly belongs to Christ is going to WANT to serve Him and His kingdom. "Be ye therefore doers of the Word, and not hearers only"! There certainly is an almost visible Christ-like radiance surrounding the real Christian!

Verse 12: "Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." Are you praising God for the hope that is in you? Are you waiting with joyful anticipation of better things to come even when bad things are happening? Are you praying without ceasing; for yourself, for your neighbor, for the world, for the kingdom of God and the spread of the Gospel?

Verse 13: "Contribute to the needs of the saints, practice

hospitality." Time, talent and treasure—these are the areas of giving. Tithing is the Christian's duty. Building up the body of Christ, the church, is the Christian's duty. Being welcoming to all souls, whether here at the church, your home, or anywhere else, is the Christian's duty. All of these are the Christian's joy!

Verse 14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." This is a difficult one. The flesh is inclined to do the cursing, not the blessing. Each of us needs the help of the Holy Spirit for all of these, but especially this one.

Verse 15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep." As brothers and sisters in Christ, we care about, and for, one another. Joy is enhanced when it is shared, and heartfelt compassion and words of sympathy help relieve the burden of sorrow, especially at the loss of a loved one.

Verse 16: "Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty (proud), but associate with the lowly; never be conceited." Strive to get along with all people, every person for whom Jesus died! Our best example here is the Lord Himself; Not only did He eat with sinners, He died for all of them! We remember, too, that "pride goes before a fall..."

The remaining verses, 17-21, address the human, the sinful tendency, toward vengeance, getting even with someone who has wronged us. The true Christian will never repay an evil deed with a deed just as evil. Our calling is to be at peace with all people, including those who make themselves our enemy. If he has needs, we are to meet them, provide for the one who has wronged us. The best way to deal with evil is shown in the last verse, "overcome evil with good". God sees everything; He knows when one of His children has been harmed in some way, and He Himself will do the avenging! No evil person is going to get by with anything, a fact which is given to comfort us! Verse 20 needs a bit of explanation: concerning providing food or drink to your enemy, "by so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." This is an oriental expression meaning that your good deed in repayment for evil will cause his conscience to be uneasy, and hopefully he will experience the pain of contrition. Or, simply, you will melt him down with kindness!

How did we do? If you came up short on one or more of these practical ways to witness to your Christian faith and to glorify our God, remember, we have all failed. God knows. Rather than punish you and me He wants to forgive us! "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." This doesn't mean wait until the next corporate confession. At the instant we realize we've sinned, we should turn to God, confess the sin, and ask Him to forgive! He will! Why? Because He loves us; because Jesus already atoned for the sin. Because He promised! Because He wants us to remain confident in our hope for heaven where there is no sin!

As soon as this worship hour concludes we have the opportunity to start anew. We were recreated already in baptism, joined with Jesus who both is, and shows us, "the way, the truth, and the life"! Renewal and growth is ongoing as we put Paul's inspired words—God's Word—into practice. And do as Jesus did, showing us how to do all of the things listed here! He kept the heavenly Father's law of love perfectly! He loved without limit! A good way to remember and practice the "Marks of a Christian" is to be mindful of our Lord all the time, and to be faithful in Bible study, worship and prayer.

Let's all, together, live up to the name "Christian" to God's eternal glory! In Jesus' name, Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding will keep your hearts and minds through a living faith in Christ Jesus. Amen.

