

***The Sacrifice of Your Sleeping, Eating,
Going-to-Work, Walking-Around, Everyday, Ordinary Life'
Part 6 – Rejoicing in Hope***
Romans 12:1-2,11-12

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ November 22, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹I 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. ²Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. (Romans 12:1-2,11-12, NRSV)

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In August of 2000, a Russian submarine called the *Kursk* went down in the Barents Sea, in the southern part of the Arctic Ocean. As soon as was possible, divers were sent down to assess the situation and determine whether anyone had survived. As they were circling the ship, they heard a pinging sound and began to listen more closely. It was a sort of Morse code from some of the men in the ship who had gone back as far as they could to where there was still breathable air. The divers easily interpreted the code. Over and over the trapped men were tapping out one simple phrase, “Is there any hope?”²

Those doomed sailors were not the first or last to ask that question. Even today, some of us may find ourselves asking the same thing. While there certainly is much goodness and beauty in our world to be celebrated, recent catastrophic events have reminded us that in more and more corners of our world things seem to be getting increasingly worse as time goes on. Closer to home, some of us find ourselves – day after day, month after month, year after year – trapped in difficult circumstances or patterns out of which we just can’t seem to break free. Even when everything in life is good for a season our joy is tainted because we know it’s not going to last.

Some of us here, in fact, might have given up hope a long time ago if it weren’t for a promise from God which is the reason for our gathering this morning. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come into our broken world to make the world whole again. And when Christ was raised from the dead, not just in spirit but in body, it was revealed to us that God is at work renewing and restoring *all* of creation. In other words, Jesus didn’t just come to help our souls escape the physical world to some higher spiritual plane. No, Jesus came to redeem *even the material world* to its God-intended wholeness so that we can live here forever, body and soul, with our Creator in peace. “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven!”

Understand, this is not only the vision of the Christian Gospel, it is *uniquely* the vision of the Christian Gospel. Did you know that? All religions of the world offer some form of salvation, but in most of them salvation involves liberation *from* our ordinary and broken world and into some transcendent spiritual existence beyond. It is the Christian Gospel alone which declares that salvation is not about escaping from this world but about seeing this world itself renewed transformed. Not just souls but bodies as well. And not just people but nature, and governments, and families, and work, and beauty, and time, and culture.³ All of it!

So, is there any hope? The unique answer the church has for the world is, “Yes. There is enduring hope. Not hope that we will one day leave the mess of this world behind but hope that one day we will see the mess of this world, and us as a part of that mess, cleaned up and cleaned up for good!”

¹ I’ve shamelessly stolen this title from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of Romans 12:1 in *The Message*.

² Illustration borrowed from Tony Evans in his sermon, *God is Up to Something Great*.

³ Tim Keller was helpful here in *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 223-224.

This is, let me remind you, Paul's message here in Romans 12. In view of God's grace, in light of what God has already done for us in Christ, we are to offer up our whole lives to God, allowing ourselves to be transformed into the pattern of Jesus' life so that our lives can then become an example to this world around us of what God has in store. In verses 11-12, Paul gets very specific about how this can be realized in our lives. There are six things we must do, he says, one flowing right from the other. Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. Follow me now as we walk through these six directives one at a time in an effort to see how God means them to guide our lives.

First, **“Do not lag in zeal.”** In other words, don't give up. Don't burn out. Pour everything you have into the good work of the kingdom.

I think one of the things which threatens our perseverance is this nagging sense in us that our work will not count for anything in the end. In fact, people who have come to believe that it is God's ultimate plan to destroy this world and take us somewhere else better in the end have had an especially hard time working for renewal in this life. Ever try working hard on some chore you knew wasn't going to count for anything? Imagine writing a book you knew nobody would ever read, or building a house you knew nobody would ever occupy, or blazing a trail up a mountain you knew nobody would ever set foot upon. Some of us have worked in jobs where we failed to see how our work was making any sort of good and lasting difference in the world and we know how difficult it is not to lag in zeal in those jobs.

But again, the message of the Gospel is that whenever we join God in his work in this world we participate in work that will make an eternal difference in a world God will never abandon! And so we zealously seek justice for others in this world because we believe that in the end justice will rule the day – the hungry will be fed, the refugee brought home, the captive set free, the blind able to see. We zealously proclaim that peace with God is possible because it is! Through the sacrifice of Christ we can find ourselves included in God's family as his forgiven and beloved children and that inclusion, which stretches on for eternity, can begin now! We also believe that people can be reconciled to one another, that God can heal relationships today which can then prosper on into eternity. And so we work zealously to see such reconciliation come to pass. And since we believe that God's plan is to restore the health of our created world, we know that any efforts we zealously make to help the environment prosper, or to add beauty to our world through our architecture or artwork, will not be in vain. This world will be restored and we can contribute to that restoration today!

Of course, our contribution is always done in partnership with God. More than that, God is always the one who empowers our zealous efforts. He is the vine nourishing the branch, the hand within the glove, the one beside us in the yoke pulling most of the load. This is why Paul reminds us in his second directive to **“be ardent in Spirit.”**

The word for “ardent” here in Paul's day was a word that was used to describe water coming to a boil in a pot. Literally, he's telling us here to let the Holy Spirit boil over in our lives. In I Thessalonians 5:19 he similarly says, “Do not quench the Spirit.” Let it burn. Let it boil. Let it overflow into your life. When people see your life they ought to see the life of Jesus overflowing into the world.

Years ago it was Mahatma Gandhi who famously declared to the church, “I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ.” Today, there are many who would echo his sentiment. Much of the problem is that many of us in the church have declared our allegiance to Jesus but have not had our lives transformed to look like Jesus. So the world hears the church speak about the grace and love of Christ but the world doesn't see that grace and love lived out by the church towards the world.

Do you remember Jesus' very first public declaration? In Mark 1:15 he declared, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.” From the outset Jesus made clear that with his coming God had launched his rescue operation to bring heaven to earth. The kingdom is breaking in! That's the good news.

In response, Jesus tells us to repent, a word that literally means to change your way of thinking. It's what Paul's telling us to do here in Romans 12 when he says that our minds must be renewed so that we begin to see things God's way. But it doesn't stop there. We are to repent *and* believe. Once we see God's will we must show that we trust God by acting on his will. Remember, faith that does not bear the fruit of good works is not really faith at all. It's a dead faith. For instance, if you say you believe Jesus when he tells you that loving and forgiving your enemies is the best way to

live, but then you refuse to allow Jesus to help you actually love and forgive your enemies, then you really don't believe Jesus in the first place.

Paul puts it this way with his next directive: **“Serve the Lord.”** If Jesus really is your master, then do what he tells you to do. Repent *and* believe. Let his Spirit fill and direct your life so that his love, his grace, his power, his truth boils over in your life.

I heard somebody recently say that one problem with the contemporary church is that too many Christians are happy to accept Jesus as their Savior, the one who will take care of things in the next life, but not so willing to accept Jesus as their Teacher, the one who will guide us in *this* life.⁴ Ask yourself this question. Do you accept Jesus as your teacher? Do you trust his teaching in every aspect of your life and are you willing to submit to his leading, do what he tells you to do, go where he tells you to go, say what he tells you to say, believe what he tells you to believe, love who he tells you to love?

Often the problem is that we've relegated Jesus' teaching to what we think of as the “spiritual” domain. Sure, we say, Jesus' knowledge is relevant in the realm of the church, but out in the real world, in economics, or politics, or sexuality, or family life, or education, or the environment, we have to listen to other guides who understand the current times better than Jesus ever could from his limited perspective.

Do you hear how crazy that sounds? Either Jesus is God or he's not. And if he is God then he is the creator, redeemer and sustainer of the entire universe. He is the beginning and the end. He is the smartest person who ever lived, one whose understanding is never bound by calendars or culture. His teaching is timeless, and intensely relevant and practical. Jesus has the best information – by far! – on how to live our day to day lives.

Do you believe this? Some of us don't. Right? And we demonstrate our unbelief by the way we live. We listen to the wisdom of the world instead of the wisdom of the creator of the world. Now, if that's your choice, okay. Be honest about it. But also be honest with yourself and admit that you are not Jesus' follower. In John 14:23 Jesus put it simply, “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching.”

Serve the Lord. Trust his ways for his ways are always better. Not always easier, but always better. In fact, even the man or woman who trusts Jesus as savior *and* teacher will face hardship in this life. If you follow Jesus you will face hardship because the road Jesus travels on is full of hardship. And so, Paul continues, **“Rejoice in hope.”** Be cheerfully expectant. Even when life becomes draining, see the cup as half full because it is, and it's getting fuller!

You see, we must never forget that history is going somewhere. History is not a haphazard collection of meaningless and disconnected events. There is consummation.⁵ And so along the way, as bleak as things may seem at times, we don't have to wonder about the outcome. The outcome is secure. That's what hope is. It's not escapism or wishful thinking but confident expectancy of what you know will eventually come to be.

In his classic work, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis describes the universal human experience of living in a world where deep in our hearts we sense that we were made for something more. Our world promises to give us that something more but never quite delivers. For instance, something in us makes us believe that every person on the planet was meant to be treated justly and with dignity. Something in us makes us believe that deep and lasting intimacy with our Creator should be possible. We have a sense that our relationships with one another were designed to be full of love and trust and affection more deeply than they usually are. Something in us tells us that beauty, in ourselves and in our world, is meant to last. We sense this is what we've been promised and yet justice is never fully fulfilled. God so often seems distant. Even the best of our relationships fall short. And beauty always fades.⁶

Lewis says that there are three possible reactions to this reality that the world is not delivering what we somehow sense it is supposed to deliver. One person, the fool, keeps digging. If one marriage, or job, or vacation, or hobby, or high

⁴ Dallas Willard and John Ortberg make this claim and develop it in wonderfully challenging way in *Living In Christ's Presence* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2014).

⁵ I'm borrowing these words from William Barclay in his essay on “Hope” in *New Testament Words* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 74.

⁶ I'm also drawing on N.T. Wright who beautifully outlines what he calls the “echoes of a deeper voice” in *Simply Christian* (San Francisco: Harper, 2006), especially chapters 1-4.

didn't satisfy, the next one surely will. Or the next, or the next. A fool like this, Lewis says, "Spends his whole life trotting from woman to woman, from continent to continent, from hobby to hobby, always thinking that the latest is 'the Real Thing' at last, [but is then, in the end] always disappointed."⁷

Another person, the realist, simply dismisses the longing in her heart. With age comes sensibility, she says, and freedom from those youthful pipedreams. Eventually she settles down and learns not to expect too much and represses the part of herself which used to dream of what could be. What we see is what we get and we might as well learn to deal with the disappointment.

Thankfully, there is a third way. As Lewis puts it, there are some among us who have come to believe that "creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists. A baby feels hunger: well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim: well, there is such a thing as water."⁸ The human heart longs for justice, and intimacy with God and others, and lasting beauty and so when we taste hints of these things in this life we must believe that we were made to not just taste but to drink deeply. We must keep alive hope that the longings of our hearts are imbedded so deeply because they are echoes of a life we were always meant to live and will, in fact, one day live in all its fullness. Again, this is not escapism or wishful thinking, but hope, a confident expectancy.

If you have this sort of joyful hope, you can then do what Paul tells us next we must do, which is to be "**be patient in suffering.**" When things get hard we must not quit. None of us, believers and unbelievers alike, are immune to suffering. Illness and pain, grief and loss, rejection and discouragement, like rain these things can fall down on us all. But when you have certainty that, one way or another, things will end well then you can endure.

The Bible sometimes compares this patience in suffering to childbirth, an experience I've watched up close twice in my life. How could a woman endure something so painful, and not just once but sometimes multiple times? A woman believes that there is a new life inside her body, the life of a beautiful daughter or son. In time she will be able to hold that child in her arms and will experience one of the deepest joys known to us in this life. This does not make the labor less painful, but it does give strength and determination in the midst of the pain. Jesus once said to his disciples, "**Whenever a woman is in labor she has pain, because her hour has come; but when she gives birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy that a child has been born into the world.**"⁹

Paul knows this is possible but also knows it is not easy. Even with hope, on our own we find it difficult to be patient in suffering. And so Paul has one final directive: "**Persevere in prayer.**" Never stop praying. Pray at all times, not just in church or on your knees before bedtime. Pray in the morning and the evening and the middle of the day. Pray on easy days and hard days. Pray for the world far beyond you and the world right in front of you. Pray for people you love and people you don't even like. Pray for big things like world peace and little things like a moment of peace. Talk to God about whatever is on your mind and heart – he sees it all anyway. As you do, trust that God will hear you, and answer you, and strengthen you, and forgive you, and guide you, and comfort you. He will.

Do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer. You can do all this because God will do what God has promised to do and what, in fact, God has already begun to do, even when all the evidence around you seems to suggest that the contrary is true. Do you believe this?



Let me leave you with a story.

Once long ago there was a young man who lost his wife after a long and bitter illness. This man loved his wife dearly and was devastated by her death. He lived out in the country on a beautiful piece of land, cut in two by a stream and dotted by large, old trees. His wife had always loved the trees best, which gave him an idea. He buried her body down by the stream and planted a tree next to the site in her memory. He'd gone to the local nursery and asked the expert there to give him a tree that would endure, one that would outlast every other tree on his property. The man at the nursery had just the tree in mind.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collins, 1942), 118.

⁸ Lewis, 118.

⁹ John 16:21.

Well, as the years went by the tree began to grow. The seedling became a sapling, which then became a giant tree providing shade to the gravesite for years and years. The man would visit that spot often, as would his children and their children after them. Many years later, however, after the man was long gone, the old tree itself began to die. It did die. Eventually strong wind toppled it over one day and it crashed to the ground. It was the man's grandson, an old man himself by then, who came and chopped up the tree to carry it off for firewood. All that remained now to mark his grandmother's grave was a tired old stump.

The man knew that the sight of it all would have broken his grandfather's heart. He remembered how, as a young boy, his grandfather would often tell him of the tree he'd bought in honor of his wife with a promise, a promise that it would never die. In an attempt to somehow find some closure in the loss, the grandson went back to that very same nursery where his grandfather had gone all those years before. "You sold my grandfather a bad tree," he told the owner who, of course, had no memory of the transaction that had taken place decades before. "Somebody here promised my family that the tree my grandfather planted by the stream would live forever. Well it didn't live forever. And I want to know why."

The owner of the nursery was perplexed. His business had always operated with integrity and he couldn't imagine that the previous owners had cheated a former customer. Concerned, he agreed to follow the grandson out to the site where now only a stump stood. The moment he arrived and took in the scene, however, a smile eased across his face.

"Why are you smiling?" the grandson asked him. "Don't you see how the death of this tree would have broken my grandfather's heart." Still smiling but without a word, the man simply pointed across the stream to where, not fifty feet away, the same kind of tree now stood, though even bigger and more beautiful than the first. It had taken years, but the roots of that first tree had eventually made their way beneath the stream and emerged with new life on the other side. The tree had, in fact, endured in ways the old man had never been able to envision.



Is there any hope? In spite of whatever circumstances you face today, or find yourself facing tomorrow, will you believe that there is always hope? For our God, who is faithful, will keep his promise on the other side. So do not lag in zeal. Be ardent in spirit. Serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope. Be patient in suffering. Persevere in prayer.

Amen.



The Next Step **A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Read Romans 12:1-2,11-12. Consider the six directives Paul gives in verses 11-12. Which one stands out to you? Why?
2. Which of Paul's directives in verses 11-12 do you think is the hardest to do? Why?
3. Do you believe that the church, and you as a part of the church, can be used by God to make a difference in this world that lasts forever? How so?
4. Who is somebody you know who seems to "boil over" with the Holy Spirit? How do you think that he or she got to be that way?
5. Why do some people accept Jesus as their Savior but are reluctant to accept Jesus as their Teacher? Is there a difference in your mind? What about you, are you ready to trust that Jesus has by far the best information on how to live your life?
6. Have you ever experienced patience in suffering? If so, where did that patience come from?
7. When you meet people whose circumstances have left them asking, "Is there any hope?", what do you tell them?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is hope? Is hoping for something different than wishing for something?