

A Tribute To and Challenge By Mothers Romans 12:9-21

Today is a special day as we celebrate Mothers and all that they mean to us.

Their devotion is unquestionable.

Their love is unquenchable.

Their compassion is undeniable.

An expectant mother was sitting in the Human Resources office of Motherhood, Inc. She had just read the contract of motherhood, which she was holding in her hand. Speaking to the HR director, she asked why she only got one vacation day a year. Sitting behind her desk, the grey-haired HR director responded by saying that they call it Mother's Day and technically you still have to work.

At the circus you may see the performer spinning plates on top of a skinny pole. The more plates he adds, the more he has to keep spinning. Back and forth, more and more, faster and faster. I can only speak from observation and not experience, but that is the essence of what it is to be a mother, keeping multiple plates spinning at the same time.

Comedian and actor Milton Berle once quipped that if evolution was true, mothers would have three hands. Hey, we already know they have a set of eyes in the back of their head.

Little Johnny was asked by his Sunday school teacher if he said his prayers before each meal. Little Johnny said he didn't need to because his mother was a great cook.

While watching her mother do dishes one day, little Suzie noticed that her mother had several strands of white hair sticking through her auburn hair. Inquisitively she asked her mother about it. She said that every time little Suzie did something wrong one of her hairs would turn white. After several moments of contemplation little Suzie asked her Mom why grandma's hair was all white.

Mothers spend the first two years of their child's life teaching them to walk and talk and then the next 16 years telling them to sit down and be quiet.

When I think back about my Mom, there are so many things I appreciate that she taught me. She taught me logic: "Because I said so, that's why." Or, "If you fall off that swing and break your neck, you can't go to the store with me."

She taught me religion: "You better pray that will come out of the carpet."

She taught me contortionism: "Will you look at the dirt on the back of your neck?"

She taught me stamina: "You'll sit there until you eat all your Brussel Sprouts."

She taught me weather: "It looks as if a tornado swept through your room."

She taught me to think ahead: "If you don't pass your spelling test, you'll never get a good job."

She taught me how to become an adult: "If you don't eat your vegetables, you'll never grow up."

She taught me the wisdom of age: "When you get to be my age, you will understand."

She taught me justice: "One day you will have kids, and I hope they turn out just like you, then you'll see what it's like."

She taught me anticipation: "Just wait until your father gets home."

There are a lot of things my Mom taught me about life and living, like the importance of finishing what you started and the value of hard work, but the greatest lessons learned were about the value of godly character. The passage I have chosen today is one that is a mirror of her character. Or I should say that her character reflects this passage. Her life in so many ways exemplified these traits we will consider today, but they are attributes each of us would do well to emulate in our own lives.

While today is Mother's Day, and we do well to honor them, this passage is one which should be evident in our lives. So while I speak to them as how I saw my Mom live them out, they are traits for all of us to practice with increasing measure.

Let me begin by telling you a story about my Mom and the kind of person she was. Prior to our moving to Camp Barakel where my folks served on staff, Mom was active in church. She sang in the choir, worked with Dad helping clean the church, served as head of the Jr. Church department. Once in a while she would entertain the college group in our home. One year at Halloween they made the house into a haunted house. At the end they all gathered in the family room while Mom, with a sheet over her head, read a spooky story by flashlight. When she read a certain part of the story an item got passed around. One was a bag of cold elbow macaroni that was supposed to be either brains or worms.

After we moved to camp, she led a 5-day club for all the staff children so their moms could do their camp duties. For a couple hours each day she taught Bible lessons and did crafts. She did that all summer. After a couple years she was asked to run one of the kitchens. They figured if she could feed a family of seven she could feed about 150 and did so for almost 30 years. Every morning as the staff and volunteers who were assigned to help her came to begin their day, she would have a little devotional and then pray committing the day and their service to the Lord. Over the years she developed many wonderful friendships with the ladies and teen girls. She became affectionately known as Mama Liz by all the girls.

Mom shared with me about a teen girl she once had working for her one week. To say that this girl was a challenge from the very beginning of the week would be an understatement. It wasn't that she was outwardly rebellious or crude, she just challenged everything Mom asked her to do or she wouldn't do everything she was asked or she did it with little enthusiasm. Mom responded with grace and love demonstrating joy and peace in the midst of the trials by this teen. Near the end of the week, Mom decided to have a chat with the teen about her attitude and work reminding her that everything was to be done as if they were doing it for the Lord Himself. The girl immediately apologized and said she wasn't normally like that, but she had heard so much about my Mom and the kind of person she

was that she wanted to see if everything they said about her was true and so deliberately chose to be as much of a challenge as she could and found out that my Mom was who they said she was.

As I think about that story, this passage comes to mind about the kind of godly character that mom displayed throughout her life. I think that what Paul said about himself was something that my mom wanted to practice as well. Paul told believers to follow him because he was following Christ. Living for Jesus was the highlight and hallmark of Mom's life because she wanted to be like Him in everything she did and she wanted others to see and follow her example.

In **verses 9-13** I see a godly character. I'm not going to touch on every characteristic but merely highlight the ones that parallel the story I just shared about my Mom. For example, I could talk a whole message on what it means to hate evil and cling to what is good. I think we all have an idea of what that means. What is evil and what is good aren't the things we may think them to be. They are the things that God's Word says they are. The world wants my ideas about right and wrong to change with the times or based on what my own perception of them is instead of what is absolute and founded on God's holy and unchanging Word. His Word is the only true standard by which we can truly and truthfully determine the evil we are to hate and the good we are to embrace. So let me just say this. What we see in **verse 9** essentially boils down to loving others whether they choose to practice wrong or choose to practice right. That's where sincere love is demonstrated as the principle characteristic of godliness. I am not to love someone more because they cling to what is good and neither am I to love someone less because they do what is evil. Paul tells us in **Romans 5:8** that God loved us when we were still enemies. That means we were doing things that were contrary to His holiness. And so as we consider these verses, our love for God should motivate us to have a godly character, a godly communion, and a godly conciliation.

I. A GODLY CHARACTER – vs. 9-13

Now let me say at the outset that these qualities aren't just suggestions, things that we can do if and when we want to or to whomever we want. We don't get to pick and choose who we demonstrate these qualities to. It isn't favoritism. The first thing we see is that love must be sincere.

A. Love Must Be Sincere

There's a reason why love is listed first. Love has been described as the key ingredient. When asked what the greatest commandment was, Jesus gave two. The first is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. The second is to love others as yourself. We can't practice the second one if we aren't loving God first. The second is the outgrowth of the first.

This love that we are to demonstrate to others is a divine love meaning it can only be produced in us by God's Spirit working in us. Of all the character traits He develops in the believer as we see in **Galatians 5:22-23**, love is purposely listed first because from it the others spring. Love is the foundation on which the others are built: joy, peace, patience, gentleness, and so on.

Romans 5:5 "God has poured out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit."

This love is unselfish, self-giving, and willful, which was unknown in the pagan culture in which this letter was written. This kind of love will always be centered on the well-being of others. Paul stated that it is the greatest virtue a Christian can possess. He describes the nature of love this way:

I Corinthians 13:4-8

It is patient
 It is kind
 It does not envy
 It does not boast
 It is not self-seeking
 It is not easily angered
 It keeps no record of wrongs
 It does not delight in evil
 It rejoices in the truth
 It always protects
 It always trusts
 It always hopes

It always perseveres
 It never fails
 It is the greatest (**I Corinthians 13:13**)

Jesus said He was giving a new commandment that we should love one another as He loved us. He stated that loving one another was a way of showing others that we are His disciples (**John 13:34-35**). My Mom had a love that demonstrated she was a follower of Jesus, even when some made it difficult. **I Thessalonians 3:12 "May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you."**

That tells me there is a lot of room for growth in this area of loving others, especially when you add to it the admonition from Paul that love needs to be sincere. Your translation of the Bible you are using may say that **"love is to be without hypocrisy"**. Another way to say it is that love must be genuine, the real deal as opposed to being false or hypocritical. It's false when I have ulterior motives like doing it only for what I can get out of it. It's false when I only love certain people. It's false when I don't love people the same. **I Peter 1:22 "Love one another deeply, from the heart."**

The Apostle John shows us where the rubber meets the road when it comes to love. In **I John 4** he boils it down to this: how can we say we love God if we don't love others?

I'm not sure who wrote this, but it's fitting:
**To dwell above with saints we love
 That will indeed be glory,
 But to dwell below with saints we know,
 Well, that's a different story.**

John sums it up nicely in **3:18** where he says that we shouldn't just say we love others we ought to show it in our actions. We have all heard the adage that talk is cheap. If we really want to prove we love others, we won't just talk about it, we'll actually demonstrate it in our actions. The lyrics of a chorus state that they will know we are Christians by our love. My Mom loved others sincerely with love that could only come from the Holy Spirit working in

her every day. Some days it was easier than others.

Something else about this kind of sincere love is found in **verse 10** where we read that we are to be devoted to one another in brotherly love. That speaks of a bond between believers. It speaks of loyalty, dedication, commitment and faithfulness. It's not fickle. It doesn't waver. It doesn't change. If the love we exhibit comes from God Himself through His Spirit, then because He is unchanging that love He is developing in us won't change either. Mom's love for this girl who was causing trouble was no different than the love she had for the other girls who acted as they should. It was the same and had to be if she was going to live out the love of God in her to others. Think about the transformation that would take place in homes and churches and places of work, in fact in communities where individuals lived out the sincere love of Christ and were devoted toward each other in love that isn't just an emotion, but an action. It must be sincere.

Verse 10 provides another way that love displays itself toward others. It honors others above self.

B. Love Honors Others Above Self

Honoring others isn't necessarily a natural response. Truth be told, my nature wants to be the one who is being honored. I want to be up on the platform getting the recognition or award or the promotion, to seek my own glory. In a word, it's pride.

Honoring others over myself is something that is developed by the work of God's Spirit my life as a believer. The person who honors others above self, never wants the spotlight, doesn't seek attention, always puts others ahead. The idea in the word is to give others preference, to let them go ahead or before us. We honor others by letting them go first.

That was my Mom. She would often be seen in the back of the kitchen at Camp sitting on a stool in the corner to allow others to take the lead or get the recognition. She always honored those who helped her. Honor doesn't mean to flatter or butter up. It provides genuine or sincere praise and appreciation for the accomplishments of others. She always

wanted the credit to go to those who worked alongside her and then especially to give credit to the Lord who made it all possible.

Her desire was to model the example of Christ. Paul wrote about it in his letter to the Philippian church.

Philippians 2:2-9

A word that comes to mind is humility. When we think about the life and ministry of Jesus, it was always about serving others. We read about it in **Mark 10:45** **"For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."**

Jesus served others in so many ways.

He fed them.

He taught them.

He healed them.

He died for them.

As exhausting as His ministry was, He always found time to put the needs of others above Himself.

In one of the greatest examples of honoring service exhibited by Jesus, we see Him on the night before He was crucified taking on the role of a servant and washing the feet of the disciples. The one who had every right to be served not only because He was the master/teacher, but God Himself in the flesh, became a servant and did the most menial task a servant could do – wash feet. Honoring others is seen in our service to them by putting them first.

His attitude of service stemmed from His desire to honor and bring glory to the Father. He did this by faithful obedience. Culture tells us to seek the spotlight, to get noticed. It gives tips on the right words to put on a resume to capture the eye of a recruiter or hiring manager. I launched, I redesigned, I'm a self-starter. The focus is on me. That's completely opposite of how Jesus says we should act. When we honor others, the focus is on them.

Genuine love never sulks because it didn't get noticed but seeks to put others first and even applauds others when their accomplishments are recognized. And even though the efforts of others

are seen above your own, you never lack in zeal.

C. Be Zealous in Serving the Lord

When we take our eyes off remembering who it is we serve we can lose the focus or reason for why we serve in the first place. We can become critical of what we are doing or how much we have to do. We can become critical of others who maybe don't do as much as us. We begin to look at it as something we have to do rather than as something we get to do. We begin to use people rather than serve them. They can become the objects of disdain instead of people for whom the Lord loves or for whom we have been called to serve.

Though it was hard work and long hours, my Mom always found joy in running the kitchen. She loved what she did, because she loved the Lord for whom she was doing it. Everyday in the summer she was up at 5 to be at the kitchen around 6:30 to get things started. She didn't get home until around 2 after the last dish was washed and the last tray of food prepped for dinner. She would get home for an hour or two to rest by folding laundry or doing some dusting or vacuuming to turn around at 4 and head back up to start dinner for the campers to eat at 5:30. Her evening would end around 7.

Whatever she was doing, her joyful spirit made the work for others easier to do. She was often heard humming a hymn or a chorus while she worked and sometimes others would join her. There wasn't anyone who worked with as much zeal or with such great joy as Mom. It was her delight to serve the Lord as we are reminded by the Psalmist to serve the Lord with gladness. The NIV translates the verse by saying **“worship the Lord with gladness.”** For Mom service and worship were one and the same. Scripture says that whatever we do, do it with all our might, and do everything as if we were doing it for the Lord. That would change our perspective on the tasks we are given whether at home or at work, whatever your work is.

I don't want you to get the impression that it was always easy for Mom. She had her challenges like the one I shared about earlier or the time when she

asked a volunteer worker to make a large batch of salsa. When you are feeding about 150 or so people you need a lot of salsa. The recipe had to be converted into the quantity necessary for how many they were feeding. Instead of mixing the number of required tablespoons of salt the person measured out that many cups of salt and dumped it in with the rest of ingredients. Instead of berating the person or talking about the waste, she simply helped the person start over.

Mom not only served campers with zeal, she served her family with the same zeal as well. There were the daily trips into town during the school year to pick us up after whatever sport was in season at the time. When our varsity jackets came in, she set about sewing letters and numbers and names into thick leather sleeves or heavy coat fabric. Whenever we came to her with a “Mom can you” request it was never met with a “no, I can't”. She eagerly and joyfully served the Lord.

She was joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer.

She looked forward with eagerness at the Lord's one day return. She kept a steady hand on the work she was doing, but a watchful eye to His coming again. She loved to study her Bible. After we moved to camp, our home church would send tapes from Mrs. Lindsay's Radio Bible Class that she would listen to. The Word of God was her hope, her joy, her comfort, her strength. When she battled cancer, she found promises from God's Word on which to cling. It was especially in the Psalms where she would find patience in her affliction. She battled cancer in 1975, then again in 2000. She would battle cancer a couple more times until it took her life in 2010. Yet in it all there was joyful hope that met affliction with patience and faithful prayer. She was faithful in prayer because she believed in the One who was faithful in His promises.

Let me say a word about hospitality from **verse 13**.

D. Practicing Hospitality

This was an area where I saw my Mom demonstrate

both poise and grace. I mentioned her hectic work schedule with little time to rest during the afternoon. There were days she would head home for a little rest and do her own home chores when there would be a knock on the door. Some of the ladies who came up to volunteer for the week whether in the kitchen she ran or another area of camp would take their afternoon break and come for a visit. Mom would graciously welcome them. Now she might fold laundry while they talked, but she never turned anyone away.

Where I saw the greatest evidence of God's grace was when she battled cancer and was off for the summer. Dad posted a note on the door that visitors were welcome because he knew that many of Mom's kitchen buddies wanted to stop in and see how she was doing. The note said please keep your visits to 15 minutes, which invariably went much longer. Some days one person would leave and someone else would be walking up to the door. No matter how tired she was or how she felt Mom always entertained them. She believed that if they were going to make the effort to stop in for a visit, she would be hospitable.

I have to share a really funny story to show you her spirit of hospitality. It also was during a time when she was undergoing treatment for cancer. Her older sister had traveled up from Virginia to stay and help care for Mom when there was a knock on the door. It was a cousin of Dad's we didn't see very often. They had traveled up to the area to look for the endangered and illusive Kirtland Warbler. Because they were in the area he and his wife decided to stop in for a visit. It was lunchtime and Mom didn't have a lot to offer. But her Mom taught her to make the best of what you had. There were some hamburger patties in the freezer, so my Aunt cooked up some burgers. They had some chips and she made up a vegetable platter. While eating lunch my Mom noticed that this cousin used an incredible amount of mustard with his burger. Only later after talking with his brother, did we find out that this cousin was a vegetarian and used the mustard to offset the taste of the meat. She was a gracious host and he was a gracious guest, both learning from their

mothers to serve what you have and eat what you are given.

We need to learn to be hospitable. That is one of the marks of a church leader. It literally means to entertain strangers. It speaks of being generous, done in such a way that expects nothing in return from the person you are showing hospitality to.

Mom's practice was to live out these godly characteristics.

Verses 14-16 speak about a godly communion. They fit well with the story I shared earlier.

II. A GODLY COMMUNION – vs. 14-16

My Mom sought to create unity. She was a peace maker. She chose to bless others rather than curse them. She chose to live in harmony to live out the exhortation of Paul at the end of this letter.

Romans 15:5-6

It wasn't that she wanted everyone to think like her. Even though there may have been disagreements on how something should be done, she sought unity, to agree to disagree but to do so in love.

Unity was something Jesus prayed about for all believers in **John 17:20-21** **“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as You are in Me and I am in You.”**

And then Jesus gave the reason for this unity. **“May they also be in Us so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.”**

The desire for unity was to point to God. In **Acts 2**, the early church showed unity in their fellowship. It resulted in many people being added to the church through salvation in Christ. Their unity pointed to Christ and people wanted to be part of it.

There is no unity when we show favoritism by only accepting and associating with certain people while ignoring or excluding others. That kind of attitude stems from pride. It's an attitude that says someone else isn't good enough to hang out with us. Paul

condemned the Corinthian church for this attitude in his first letter to them. They lacked unity when it came to who liked what teacher. They lacked unity when it came to taking communion which also included a meal. Some were eating and gorging themselves while others went hungry. Some refused to share with others who had a genuine need.

Peter was challenged by Paul because when Jews were around, Peter wouldn't hang out with the Gentiles he had been associating just a day earlier.

Communion refers to the unity and fellowship that should be evident regardless of social position or economic status. There should be no factor that separates believers in Christ. Paul stated that because believers are in the body of Christ there was neither Jew nor Gentile, slave or free, male or female. We are all one in Christ. Paul says that such a oneness gives us the ability to empathize with others in their joy or in their sorrow, to enter into their ups and downs of life. Mom sought for godly communion/unity with others.

One more characteristic in my Mom that I see in **verses 17-21**. Hers was a godly conciliation.

III.A GODLY CONCILIATION – vs. 17-21

With the girl who caused so much difficulty, Mom had every right to talk with the director and have her sent home. She could have even treated this girl the same way. But that's what the world would do and Mom didn't want to be conformed to the world, she wanted to be transformed through Christ and show that transformation. If we act like the world, how does the love of Christ live in us?

Years earlier Mom had chosen to offer herself as a living sacrifice that was holy and pleasing to the Lord. As **verse 1** states, it was her spiritual act of worship. She chose to **“live at peace with others”** in spite of how others treated her. She chose to let God do His work in that person rather than exact her own revenge. She chose to feed and give a drink to her enemy instead of retaliating. She chose to heap coals on her head. In Egyptian culture if a person was seen carrying a pan of burning coals on

his head, it was a sign of public contriteness. It was a way of demonstrating the guilt and shame he felt for some wrong action. Doing good to someone who has done wrong to us places guilt and shame on them, which hopefully brings them to repentance. In the end, as Paul says in his closing verse, we overcome evil with good. It is a way of bringing about repentance and reconciliation.

The Apostle Peter said, **“Above all, love each other deeply because love covers over a multitude of sins.” (I Peter 4:8)**

19th century Englishman Robert Chapman once stated **“Seeing that so many preach Christ and so few live Christ, I will aim to live Him.”**

That was my Mom's desire. She wanted to live Christ and this passage is a good summary of her aim and indeed the character of her life. It was the Apostle Paul who said, **“For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:21)** On earth Mom lived Christ, now she is experiencing that gain through her death.

It is my prayer that this quick overview of **Romans 12:9-21** will challenge each of us to live godly in Christ Jesus. My Mom set a great example for me to follow and perhaps for you as well.

Let me close with a poem for you to ponder.
 You're writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
 By the deeds that you do, and the words that you say.
 Men read what you write, whether faithless or true.
 Say, what is the gospel, according to you.