
How to Become What God Wants Us to Be

Sermon • Rev'd John Shoaf • 30 August 2026

Romans 12:9-21 • Matthew 16:21-28



May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts give glory to you, O Lord. Amen.

Paul starts with a list of what Christians are to do:

- Let love be genuine
- Hate what is evil
- Love each other with mutual affection
- Be zealous and ardent in spirit
- Serve the Lord
- Rejoice in hope
- Be patient in suffering
- Persevere in prayer
- Extend hospitality to strangers

And that's just a partial list of what we're all supposed to do. Whew! No wonder he calls Christians "saints"!

The list, which goes on into a second full paragraph, seems exhaustive (and exhausting). Through all this, we get a picture of how God wants us to act. Can one person do all these things? But we should strive for them. These are the marks of a Christian. Can anyone do these things? Yes, they can, certainly. Many people, non-Christians, ask the question: Can't I just be a good person without believing all this stuff about God? Yes, they can. But they are fooling themselves if they think they are doing it entirely apart from God. For God has planted his laws in our hearts, and God is pleased when they do good things. People can deny God, but there is a piece of God in them, nevertheless. They are still God's creation, with the inborn ability to seek and know God, even if they haven't sought him.

The seeking is what makes the difference. In the Gospel reading, Jesus accuses Peter of setting his mind "not on divine things but on human things" (Matt 16:23). Setting one's mind on divine things entails looking on everything as part of God's plan. This was Peter's error. To give him credit, I think he spoke out of love. He and the other disciples loved their teacher, and had come to depend on him in many ways. The thought of him suffering and dying at the hands of the authorities saddened and frightened them. Peter spoke out of his fear and confusion at Jesus' words, when he said, "This must never happen to you!" Jesus' reply ("Get behind me, Satan!") seems harsh, but the stakes are high. Peter and the others must understand the part Jesus will play in his Father's plan. Jesus is just beginning to explain it to them, and he has to get them to lift their sights above earthly things. They are participants in God's great mission to spread the Gospel. From that point on, their lives will be profoundly changed, and to apply Paul's words, they must "put an end to childish things" and childish thinking, and start to become the servants Jesus may rely on.

We too must mature as Christians. The list I gave at the beginning, from Paul's letter, is the outward working of the inner change we all must undergo. A mature Christian recognises that all things and all people work together to fulfill God's plan for humanity. We are all part of that plan, in greater or lesser, but always important, ways. God is shaping us into the servants he wants us to be, servants who are able to do their part, servants who will be hard at work until their master returns, to borrow from one of Jesus' parables. We who are the servants, as we mature, will show more and more of attributes Paul outlines. They are not just recommendations, or "nice-to-haves." Loving each other, rejoicing in hope, persevering in prayer, and all the rest not only make us good examples for the rest of the world to follow; they help to bring about God's kingdom on earth.

Paul's list is self-perpetuating as well. Have you heard people say that if you make a point of smiling more, you will actually be happier? It's the same with all these things. God shapes us through our actions, and we also shape ourselves, through the influence of the Holy Spirit. Loving others brings love your way. Persevering in prayer brings a closer connection with God, who helps you to pray more deeply, again through the Spirit. This isn't surprising; this is the way God made the world, and the way God made us. Since God wills it, and God designed us this way, who are we to fight it? God's way is the easy way. Many who don't know God seem to spend a lot of effort fighting him, through doubt and skepticism, when they could simply relax into his love.

I have often thought, in this age of perpetual advertising, that the slogan for the Christian church should be "Get Real." For us Christians, God's sovereignty over everything is not just the way we perceive things or the way we make sense of the world, it is the way the world is. People search for meaning and answers to life's difficult problems, like the often-heard "why does God let bad things happen to good people?" Faith can provide comfort, and prayer can give you some understanding; but we often come, at some point, to the realisation that we won't always understand why things happen or why they are the way they are. Sometimes, they simply are. If you believe that God is ultimately good and loving, which he is, then you can begin to accept the things you can't control, as children have to accept the things their parents do, even if they cannot always understand them. So although some non-Christians might think we live in a fantasy world of self-deceit, we are actually very realistic — we are living in God's world. This is real. And in God's real world, we act as Paul says we should, because it is God's will; and because it furthers God's plans for us.

Jesus finishes his instruction to the disciples in saying, "The Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done" (Matt 16:27). This is the sequel to what he said at first: he must first be killed and be resurrected, in order for him to return. When he returns, he will assess how well each of us has fulfilled our mission, how well we have used our gifts to help others to come to a knowledge of God. We have time to act, to follow Jesus' instruction, but we do not have infinite time. Either we have our own lifetimes in which to do what we should do, or perhaps we have less time — Jesus may return tomorrow, or next week. We don't know. There is some urgency. Jesus has shown us the way God's world should work, and we must align ourselves with God's vision and plan. Paul's list of dos and don'ts are the place to start — to start to be what God created us to be. And so we pray:

Lord God, help us to grow in faith, in compassion, and in action, as we become the people you made us to be; and guide us in the work of building your kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.