



Integrity Matters

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Romans 12:9-21

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It is getting harder all the time to tell the difference between real and fake products. Take men's Rolex watches. There's a thriving counterfeit industry out

there turning out imitation Rolex watches today. Can you tell which watch is authentic? It's the one on the left.

The same is true with regard to women's jewelry. It's hard to distinguish between costume and fine jewelry or fake pearls from real ones. It's challenging to tell the difference between hardwood floors and laminated flooring. Or ceramic tiles and vinyl flooring. Or a fake tan from a real tan.

There's a British company that markets a product called Spray-On Mud for city dwellers who want their 4x4 to look more rugged. If you want to give your neighbors the impression you've been on an off-road adventure rather than a trip to the mall, you can apply Spray-On Mud to your Land Rover. Incidentally, it's also a convenient way to camouflage your license plate so it can't be detected by a speed camera.

The 19th century Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard contrasted the authentic self with what he called the illusory self. The authentic self is what God has created us to be while the illusory self is what society wants us to be. Kierkegaard was especially critical of news outlets in this regard. Mind you, he wrote these observations back in 1843.

Our theme this fall is *Souls on Fire*. We're asking God to ignite faith in us so we can catch fire for God. Two Sundays ago, our focus was loving God by offering our bodies as

living sacrifices and being transformed by the renewal of our minds (Romans 12:1-2). Last Sunday, our focus was serving God (12:3-8). We do not serve God alone but in community as the body of Christ. Today's passage amplifies what it means to exercise authentic faith as we love and serve God together (12:9-21).

Today's reading is one of my all-time favorites. These rapid-fire injunctions summon me to more than I am. Yet, as much as I like this passage, I've never preached on it. It seems to defy explanation. What I came to realize this week is this seemingly grab-bag assortment of imperatives has considerable design and flow to it. Since a list of 30 imperatives is too many to digest in a single sermon, I've decided to break the passage into two parts. I'll concentrate today on verses 9-13, and 14-21 next Sunday.

Paul begins, "Love must be sincere" (12:9). The Greek word for sincere means "without hypocrisy." Hypocrisy dates back to the world of Greek theater. A hypocrite was someone who acted a role on stage; who played a part. We are not merely playing a role. Love must be genuine and authentic.

"Love must be sincere" functions as the organizing thought in this passage. The other imperative verbs in verses 10-13 are participles. Let me take you back to English

101. A participle is a verbal form ending in "ing." Participles function as auxiliary verbs to support the main idea of the sentence. In other words, all the other imperatives



in these verses amplify what it means to practice sincere love.

The imperative “Hate what is evil,” utilizes a strong word for hate. It means a vehement dislike of something evil. We do not merely tolerate evil. We hate it! Notice, we do not hate people who do evil things. Rather, we hate what evil does to people.

“Cling to what is good.” The only other place where the word *cling* appears in Scripture is in relationship to married couples. Adam was directed by God to leave his father and mother and *cling* to Eve. Cling means to stick to someone like glue.

be devoted (*philostorgoi*) to
one another in love (*philadelphia*).
honor one another above
yourselves.
ROM 12.10

Verse 10 joins two related imperatives, “Be devoted (*philostorgoi*) to one another in love (*philadelphia*)” and “honor one another above yourselves.” I’ve

supplied two Greek words in the first imperative so you can appreciate how this command supports the main theme of genuine love. The root in both Greek words, *philia*, is the Greek word for love that connotes friendship.

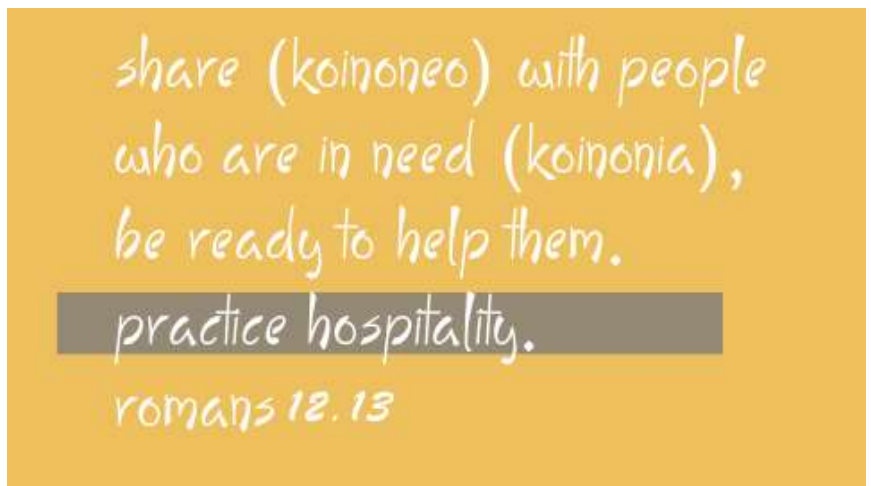
“Honor one another above yourselves.” The Greek word for honor is borrowed from athletic competition. If we are to be competitive about anything in the Christian life, it is contending to outdo one another in showing honor.

Verse 11, “Never be lacking in zeal, keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” strings together three related imperatives. The first two imperatives address the problem of complacency in the Christian life, while the last

imperative brings us back to earth again. We can become so impassioned and fervent for God that we lose sight of our central mission of serving God.

The three imperatives in verse 12, “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer” also fit well together. Paul is enough of a realist to know that “rejoicing in hope” requires us to exercise patience in hard times and perseverance in prayer.

The final two imperatives in verse 13, “Share (*koinoneo*) with the Lord’s people who are in need (*koinonia*)” and “Practice hospitality” also go together. The



Greek word translated “share” in the first imperative derives from the common Greek word *koinonia* meaning community or fellowship. We demonstrate community through tangible acts like giving money and sharing hospitality.

That’s the passage, as I see it. Now, let me put it into a larger context.

Our focus today is loving and serving God together. Our church is on a mission from God. We are not simply on our own mission. We attempt to join God in what He is already doing in the world. God is on a mission to redeem and save the world.

Our 3.7 million dollar, annual budget is the money we invest in God’s mission. Our budget can be divided into thirds. First, we support ministries of this church and the staff it takes to run them. Second, we invest money in the

care and upkeep of this facility, one of our primary tools for ministry. Third, we invest money in mission enterprises beyond our local church.



Allow me to drill down on this third investment of supporting mission and evangelism efforts beyond our local church. This year alone, we have budgeted \$650,000 to support

mission partners near and far. If I add the \$125,000 we will give in additional mission enterprises, this number approaches \$800,000.

The group that oversees the allocation of our mission dollars has come to the conclusion that we are spread too thin. While our influence may be far and wide, it is not as deep and lasting as we would like. This group has decided to cut our mission partners in half—from 80 to 40. We won't give any less money to mission. We will invest more money in fewer projects.

We want you to become familiar with these mission partners. Today in the hall, 30 of our mission partners have travelled, some from considerable distance, to meet you. We invite you to this Mission Festival so you can share in their work. Our devotional highlights the ministry of 18 such mission partners.

Some of them are on the front lines of alleviating hunger or homelessness. Some are giving bold witness for Christ in areas of the world that are hostile to Christianity. Some are medical missionaries, involved in camping or campus

ministry. Some use the vehicle of good hygiene or sports to communicate God's great love.

There was a major film released this week, *Queen of Katwe*, which has received positive reviews. One of our mission partners, Sports Outreach, is teaching children chess to boost esteem and provide a way out of poverty. The movie is an improbable true story about a 14-year-old girl from Uganda who becomes an international chess champion. Hollywood makes plenty of stupid movies. When they make one with redeeming value, we want to get behind it.

Let me tell you about one additional mission emphasis gaining momentum right now. We'll tell you more about this initiative in Focus groups over the next month. Two such focus groups being offered today. We're seeking your input and support for three major initiatives: eliminating our debt, enhancing our home and expanding our outreach. Let me tell you more about this last initiative. We want to share the gospel in word and deed with more people in Northern Virginia. Our plan is to launch a multi-purpose storefront two miles from here to address people's spiritual, relational and tangible needs. While we will invest real money in this effort, our ultimate goal is to enlist you as volunteers in this effort.

Why we are imagining this new mission? There are over 6,000 people who live within a five-mile radius of our church living below the



poverty line (less than \$25,000 annually). There are 146,000 people within a ten-mile radius who have no connection with

any church. These two statistics alone will not allow us to do nothing.

It seems like I am far afield from Romans 12. Not really. This passage is a summons to live as authentic Christians. It's not going to work to fake it. All these efforts at mission and evangelism are going to fall flat unless we are willing to embody these Biblical imperatives. People need to see the real deal.

Much has been written and said about younger generations today, what sociologists call millennials. One thing I have observed about younger generations is their uncanny ability to tell the difference between real and phony people. Younger generations are not looking for slick worship. They do not want to be entertained. They want authentic community. Integrity matters to them.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Here's what I want you to do. On the screen is a list of 13 imperatives from verses 9-13. You'll also find these imperatives listed under today's order of service. I want you to do two things. First, circle an imperative that appeals to you. Is there one that interests and intrigues you right now? Second, put an asterisk next to one you want to work on this week. We'll give you time to sit with this list and ask for God's help in finding fresh courage and inspiration to become an authentic follower of Christ. Yes, integrity matters to God!

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. - Romans 12:9-13