

**Romans 12:9-21 (MSG)**

<sup>9-10</sup>Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it. Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good. Be good friends who love deeply; practice playing second fiddle.

<sup>11-13</sup>Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master, cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality.

<sup>14-16</sup>Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath. Laugh with your happy friends when they're happy; share tears when they're down. Get along with each other; don't be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don't be the great somebody.

<sup>17-19</sup>Don't hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you've got it in you, get along with everybody. Don't insist on getting even; that's not for you to do. "I'll do the judging," says God. "I'll take care of it."

<sup>20-21</sup>Our Scriptures tell us that if you see your enemy hungry, go buy that person lunch, or if he's thirsty, get him a drink. Your generosity will surprise him with goodness. Don't let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.

**Romans 12:9-21 “The Message”**  
**“A List for Life”**

**Opening Prayer:** Please bow with me in prayer. Oh God, speak to us today. Show us your way that leads to life eternal. In Christ’s name, **Amen.**

**Introduction:** **Social media** is full of people offering their tips for a better life. Not a day goes by when the blogosphere doesn’t put out more of those lists of the dos and don’ts for some aspect of life. Here are just a few examples:

**“4 things every woman needs in a relationship.”** According to this list the number one thing every woman needs is **“She wants to be wanted.”** Seems a little obvious, but I guess it’s true.

**Or how about, “10 things you should never say to your kids.”** And the number one thing on this list of things not to say to your kids is **“Great Job!”** You’re not supposed to say this because it makes your kids dependent on receiving praise anytime they do anything.

**And finally, there’s “The 8 things the happiest people do every day.”** Here, the number one thing is that the happiest people **“devote a great amount of time to their family and friends.”** That leaves me wondering how much time is a **“great”** amount of time. Don’t you just hate us logically thinking engineers?

**Anyway, start a headline with “X Things”** and then fill in some subject and people will read your blog. Here are the essentials of life reduced to a list.

**Well, long before** Internet blogs and bloggers, the Apostle Paul gave us a list of **“18 things for living a better life.”** While today’s bloggers’ lists tend to focus in on some narrow aspect of life, Paul’s list focuses on all of life. And first on Paul’s list is **“Love from the center of who you are; don’t fake it.”** If you’re gonna be who God’s calling you to be, you need to take Paul’s list to heart. This list isn’t just a list you read, it’s a list you live. **Paul’s list is “A List for Life.”**

**PAUSE**

**Move I.**

**We all crave concise practical advice. What do I** need to do to raise my kids to be responsible adults? **What do I** need to do to keep my spouse happy so we can stay together forever? **What do I** need to do to make more friends, so I don't have to be lonely? And I'm not just talking about the casual, fair-weather kind of friend, but the kind of friend who sticks with you through thick and thin. **What do I** need to do to make my boss happy so I can get a promotion and a raise? **What do I** need to do to make life worth the living? If anyone could give us some concise practical advice on any of these and lots of life's other questions, we'd eagerly set about trying to follow that advice. **That's probably why we** like lists so much. Lists boil things down into a set of concise points.

**Our Bible lesson today** is the Apostle Paul's list for the early Christians who lived in Rome. **The translators** of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible title this passage "**Marks of the True Christian.**" Here is a list of things to do if you want to be a faithful follower of Jesus in Rome, **the very heart of pagan society.**

There's an old English proverb that I'm sure you've all heard many times. "**When in Rome do as the Roman's do.**" Basically, what that old proverb is prescribing is to follow the customs of the society in which you're living. **If you're in a society** that drives on the left side of the road, drive on the left side of the road. What would happen if you were in **Australia**, or England, or India, or Japan, or South Africa and you decided to keep driving on the right like we do here in America? Well, you'll cause a wreck. But how far do you take this advice to do as the Romans do when in Rome? **What if you're in a society** that pays bribes to government officials, do you pay bribes to government officials? **What if you're in a society** that sacrifices babies to Moloch, do you sacrifice your baby to Moloch? I think you can see the old proverb only works to a point.

**Romans weren't** godless heathens. They were religious, but they were polytheistic in that they worshiped many gods and goddesses. **They worshiped** the gods and goddesses of ancient mythology. Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Vestal, Ceres, Diana, Venus, Mars, Mercury, Neptune, Vulcan, and Apollo, among many, many others. **The word pagan** simply means non-Christian. Pagan people are spiritual. Pagan people do have faith. But pagan people don't worship and have faith in Jesus.

**So here we have the Apostle Paul** writing to people who aren't only in Rome, they're actual Roman citizens. But these Romans have responded to God's calling on their lives and they have decided to follow Jesus. They're still Romans, but they're no longer pagan polytheist; they're Christians. So Paul's practical advice to them is "*When in Roman, do as a follower of Christ does.*" The good that the people of Roman do they should keep on doing, but they must not let the evil overcome them. **In Romans 12:10 (MSG)** the Apostle Paul says, "**Run for dear life from evil; hold on for dear life to good.**" That's very practical advice.

Roman in the first century A.D. was a pre-Christian society. It would be a couple of hundred years before Christianity became the national religion. **Here in America today**, many religious commentators see us as becoming a post-Christian society much like Europe has already become. People are spiritual. People do have faith. But an increasing number of people don't worship or have faith in Jesus. **They are non-Christian.** Many are even non-religious. So, Paul could just as readily be writing his list **for us today** as he was for those believers back in first-century Rome. *When in America, do (not do as an American does, but) as a follower of Christ does.* The good that the people of America do we should keep on doing, but we must not let the evil overcome us. That's very practical advice for us today. **Yes, we all really do crave practical advice.**

**End I.**

**Move II.**

**But real life can be messy and complex.** Black and white so often **blends into grey.** **“Run for dear life from what is evil, hold on for dear life to what is good”** (Romans 12:9b, MSG). In many ways that statement is **like motherhood and apple pie.** There’s no way to argue with its virtue. There’s no way to assail its logic. Shun the evil while seeking the good. But that statement begs the question, **“What exactly is evil, and what exactly is good, and how exactly do you tell the difference between the two?”** Are good and evil polar opposites, or are good and evil relative? At the risk of confusing you even more, I’m saying they’re both. **Good and evil are both opposite and relative.**

I hope I’m not being too philosophical here, but for a moment let me try to sort through this perplexing tangle with a simple example. **Is electricity good, or is it evil?** Of course, the answer to that question depends on how you use electricity. **If you use electricity** to provide light on a dark night that’s good, **but if you use electricity** to torture a person that’s evil. **So, electricity’s goodness or evilness** is determined relative to the outcome of its use. Good and evil are opposites with respect to outcome but they’re relative with respect to use. The same electrical shock that’s torture in one instance can be lifesaving to another. **(When it’s lifesaving** we call it a defibrillator and that’s good.) **Good and evil are both opposite and relative.** I’m not sure if this example has made the perplexing tangle of good and evil any clearer for any of you, but I am sure that it’s at least made you think. **Life is good,** even if it’s also messy and complex.

**Back in 2011 Zondervan published “The Story,”** which is the Bible organized as one continuous story of God and God’s people. If you think the Bible’s too hard to read because of all of its geologies, obscure theological proses, and sheer repetition, you’ll like *“The Story.”* *“The Story”* is the kind of book you can read cover to cover.

One of the chapters is **the Old Testament story** of how Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, and he ended up in Egypt. Years later when famine swept over the land, **Joseph**, who is now the Pharaoh's minister of agriculture, saves his brothers and their father by bringing them to Egypt and feeding them from the food the Egyptians had stored up during the earlier years of plenty. The key verse at the climax of the story is what I want to bring into our discussion of good and evil this morning. **In Genesis 50:20 (NKJV)**, Joseph looks at his brothers and says, **“You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order ... to save many people alive.”** Who would have ever thought Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery would ever be good? Certainly not any of us. But God thought that, **and what God thinks happens. God's the one** who determines the outcome. God can take even what we intend as evil and turn it into good. **Good and evil are both opposite and relative.**

**Lists may be** simplifications of a complex reality, but at least the list can point you in the right direction. **But lists are** also a dime a dozen, especially in your newsfeed on Facebook. **All kinds of bloggers** post a headline ‘X’ things and fill in the blank hoping to get you to click on their link. So be sure you check the source of the list. **How did** the old Westinghouse slogan go? **“You can be sure if it's Westinghouse.”** Well, **since its God** who can bring good even out of evil, and God is by definition the source of all good, then clearly **“you can be sure of its God's list.”** God's list always leads to life and never leads to death. **That's why** this list in Roman's 12:9-21 is not only worth reading but it's also worth doing. **God's list** is **“A List for life.”** **But real life can still be messy and complex.**

**End II.**

**Move III.**

**So remember, God's not expecting you to tackle Paul's list alone.** God's very acquainted with our weaknesses. God knows that often our spirits are willing, but our bodies are weak. God knows that sometimes our good intentions go right out the door and we fail to do the very things we know we ought to do. **The truth is** that some of the things on Paul's list are nigh unto impossible for us to do. Take for instance number nine: **“Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath”** Romans 12:14 (MSG). Clearly Paul takes that straight from Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount, so that's not a piece of causal advice from Paul, it's an imperative command directly from God. But let's face it. That one just doesn't come naturally. We don't bless enemies, we curse them; we sabotage them. **If they hit us** we hit them back twice as hard. Oh yeah, now we're running head on against number 13 on Paul's list. **“Don't hit back”** (Romans 12:17, MSG). God's not going to back down on this command, even though it goes completely against our gut. The only way any of us are ever gonna treat enemies the way God wants us to treat them, **is for God to change our heart.** How else are we gonna surprise our enemies with goodness?

**By far one of the oldest and best known lists** of all times is the 10 commandments. **God gave those commandants** to Moses up on Mount Saini nearly thirty-five hundred years ago. God spelled out exactly what God expected of the people of Israel in black and white. God promised if they would do those 10 things that it would go well for them in the Promised Land. **But time and time again** the people come up short. **Particularly on** the first and second commandments not to have other gods and not to make and worship idols. **That's why God sent his Son.** No longer does God use the lists to judge us, but he uses the list to help us see who we are becoming as new creatures in Jesus Christ. **We can't possibly come** close to living into Paul's list without some serious help.

**God didn't give** the 10 commandments **and Paul's list** in Romans 12:9-21 to individual persons. God gave them to a group of people. God gave the 10 Commandments to the people of Israel, and God gave Paul's list in Romans 12 to the people of the church in Rome. **God knows we do better** at doing what we should do, when we do it together. We are accountable not only to God but to each other. **Yet, God's lists counters** the mob mentality that prefers revenge over justice and annihilating enemies over peace.

**Number five on** Paul's list is "**Don't burn out, keep yourself fueled and aflame**" Romans 12:11 (MSG). We do grow weary in doing good. We do tire of trying to get along with everybody. **Only when we keep ourselves fueled** and aflame do we stand a chance of persevering at Paul's list. **The NIV says**, "Keep your spiritual fervor." That fervor doesn't come from us, **it comes from** the Spirit of God living within us. We can indeed do all things, even the hard things on Paul's list, through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:19). We do these things not because they are easy, but because they are **the hard work of** being a follower of Jesus. **So please remember, God's not expecting you to tackle Paul's list alone.**

**End III.**

**Conclusion:** The number one thing on Paul's list is "*Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it.*" **Yes, we all really do crave practical advice.** We like lists because they boil things down into a set of concise points. And Paul's practical advice boils down to this, "*When in Roman, don't do as the Romans do, do as a follower of Christ does.*" **But real life can still be messy and complex.** Good and evil are both opposite and relative. Yet, life's good, even if it's also messy and complex. **So remember, God's not expecting you to tackle Paul's list alone.** God doesn't use the lists to judge us, but he uses them to help us see who we're becoming as new creatures in Jesus Christ. We do do better at doing what we should do, when we do it together. Paul's list is "*A List for Life.*"

I'm going to close this morning with a version of Dr. Kent M. Keith's "*The Paradoxical Commandments*" that speaks to the difficulty of living into God's lists. This was never intended as a song, so it's a bit awkward, **but I think you'll see why Mother Teresa** liked this so much that she had it posted on the wall of her orphanages in Calcutta.

{**Play Video: "*The Paradoxical Commandments HD.mp4*" [2:52]}**}

**The Paradoxical Commandments**  
by Kent M. Keith (1968)

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.  
Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.  
Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.  
Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.  
Do good anyway.

Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable.  
Be honest and frank anyway.

The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds.

Think big anyway.

People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs.

Fight for a few underdogs anyway.

What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight.

Build anyway.

People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have, and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you have anyway.

**Closing Prayer:** Let's pray. O God, thank you for giving us your "*List for Life*."

We know it's hard, but help us to love, and to do good; anyway. Give us the strength and courage to follow you on your path that leads to life. **Amen!**

**10:30 Closing Hymn: "*Blest Be the Tie that Binds*"**

All Four Verses

**Sending Forth:** God's told us what He expects. God's given us a list. But we still need to allow God to lead us. Go forth following God's list, "*A true List for Life*." **Amen!**