

FERVENT LOVE

Romans 12:11

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As we continue to look at the behavioral qualities of love, marks of the genuineness of love, we come to Romans 12:11: “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord” (NIV).

With this Sunday, I’m completing seven years of ministry in pastoring in this community. We didn’t plan the circumstances to work out this way, but this Sunday, which ends seven years—next Sunday beginning eight years—but on this particular Sunday, it just happened to fall that we would see brought into existence the Christian Center. So this Scripture matched kind of an anniversary for me, and new beginnings for our church.

The Scripture is, in regard to love, a description of love. A love that is fervent. When we talk about doing work of the Lord, we really are talking about doing things in love. The Lord noted in His Olivet discourse that at the end of the age, He wondered if the love of many wouldn’t grow cold. King James puts it this way: that it would “wax cold.”

When He gave His charge to Simon Peter in the John 21 as He closes out His earthly ministry to Peter before restoring Peter to a place of responsibility in the Church, the Lord has some very simple questions He wants to ask Him. The questions He does not ask him are these. He does not say to him: “Peter, do you believe in the Westminster Catechism? Do you believe in the Sixteen Fundamental Truths? Do you promise to pay tithes regularly? Do you promise to always witness for Me every chance you have? All of those may be, in due season, important questions. But the fundamental question, the underlying question, is the one that Jesus asked: “Do you love me?” (John 21).

Know that if we answer that question from the heart: “Yes, Lord, You know that I love You,” then all the other kinds of things have a way of falling in place.

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Paul, today in this verse, Romans 12:11, is sharing with us some qualities of fervent love. Three phrases especially single out qualities of love that, as disciples, we're to have in our lives.

I. The first one is translated as this: "Never flag in zeal."

Actually, what Paul is doing in the language in which he writes is a very short, concise way of putting things. Literally he is saying, "In zeal, not lazy." Or, "In regard to zeal, not lazy." He begins in his description of fervent love with a negative. What fervent love is not.

This phrase, "In regard to zeal, not lazy," doesn't come across at all in "never flag in zeal." We wouldn't quite pluck those words out of it. But "in regard to zeal, not lazy." The same word which is used in Romans 12:11 for lazy is the identical word which the Lord uses in Matthew 25:26 to describe the servant in the parable of the talents who has been given the one talent and did nothing with it. The Lord says to him, "You wicked and lazy servant." Same word there as is here in Romans 12:11.

I want to use, for a moment, that one-talent person in the story of Matthew 25 as a support example for this theme of "love, not being lazy." Here was a person who, on the one hand, lacked zeal, and, on the other hand, demonstrated sloth. Therefore, he serves as a tremendous example of what Paul is saying in regard to "zeal, not lazy." This one-talent person who did nothing with the assignment that the Lord had given him lacked zeal.

To me, it's fascinating to trace the history of words and see how they work themselves into their present meaning. But in the New Testament, the word "zeal" originally started out meaning haste or speed. It is used, for example, of Salome, the daughter of Herodias in Mark 6:25. She came in immediately with haste or zeal to King Herod and asked, "I want you to give me the head of John the Baptist on a platter." So if you want to connect Romans 12:11 with Mark 6:25, that's an interesting connection. You'd have to search for it like a needle in a haystack, but it's there.

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What is the implication of Salome coming in? It means she made up her mind instantly, and she acted on it. She came in speed.

Gradually, the word, as it became associated with emotional sorts of reactions, came to designate a person who acts intensely. Who might go, in the spectrum of the phrase, “Do it now!” Or it might be, “Get it done.” Sometimes, something can be done immediately. And other times, it takes the perseverance of zeal to get it done. But the servant in the story which Jesus tells in Matthew 25 neither did it now nor did he get it done. He lacked this quality of stick-to-itiveness, of energetic discipleship to the Lord. And he demonstrated sloth, demonstrated laziness.

How did he do this? I think if I were to try to probe psychologically the character of the man with the one talent, I would find the reason for the failure. Like many of our lives in Christian service, and just failure of our lives individually as we walk with the Lord, this man with the one talent proceeds from a very low sense of self-worth. What the master gave him to do matched his ability. The Gospel text tells us this. When Jesus told the story, he said he gave everyone talents according to their abilities. So this person didn’t have much ability, but he had a little bit. One of the dilemmas of persons who just have a little bit of talent is they tend to feel, “God’s given other people more, and he’s given me less. So what’s the use of me using mine?” Most every kind of community of believers is made up of about ninety-five one-talent people, one or two five-talent people, two or three two-talent people. And if just the five-talent people and the two-talent people do the work, that means ninety-five percent of the work doesn’t get done because the one-talent people are just kind of sitting around. Very low sense of self-worth. For some reason, he didn’t act. He was unwilling perhaps to put himself on the line, to risk.

Our sense that we don’t have much to offer the Lord, and we can’t really do anything with what He has given to us, can be a crippling sort of thing. Paul, out of his practical experience, is seeing love function within Christian community. He’s saying, “In regard to zeal, don’t be lazy. Don’t

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feel this sense of worthlessness that just roots you to a kind of stillness in your life, and you're never active for the Lord."

I think, also, this man who had the one talent in regard to laziness was simply unwilling to change. This is the dilemma of the person who has the "gift" of laziness. Some persons you see (you may have one in your own home) you may want to build a fire under them—put a keg of dynamite under them and see, when it exploded, what would happen. You've tried everything, and you can't get any change to take place. This is the case in the story of the man with the one talent. In his walk, in his relationship with God and with others, he demonstrated this capacity to just simply sit on it. Unwillingness to change.

You say, "How in the world do you know that he was unwilling to change?" I think, very simply, I can demonstrate this by the fact that he never got out. When he saw how the five-talent person was doing and how the two-talent person was doing, he never got away to them and said, "I just have this one talent, but mine's sitting in the yard doing nothing. You guys seem to have something going. Can I find out from you what is working so I can know how to use the one talent in my life?"

I have some suggestions for you. If you're kind of "one talent for the Lord" in some areas of life, that may be what the Lord is going to ask you about one of these days. Have you been willing to change? Are you willing to quit being lazy in regard to zeal?

Are you, for example, a poor student, and you're just kind of hiding your ability in the ground? Why not, instead of accepting that lying down, go find a student who is really a superior student and say to them, "What is it that you do in your life that makes you such a good student? I'd like to learn because I would like to do better myself."

Or are you a poor organizer? One of these persons who never has the ability to get the events of the day done, let alone the week, and you're always about thirty-six days behind time with

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everything? Bills overdue, and maintenance undone, and the like. Extremely poor organizer of things and family. We have, within this Body, people who are good organizers. If you know one—and if you don't know one, I'd be happy to recommend one—why not be unlike the man with the one talent who was lazy and just accepted the way he was. You go find a good organizer and say, “Share with me some of the tips in your life that show me why your five talents and your two talents are working for you.”

Are you going through real marital stress in your relationship? And you've kind of settled into, “This is the way it's always going to be. I guess we're always going to be bothered with this.” There are people who I know, and who you may know, in whose family relationships there's a tremendous joy and zest and vibrancy and growth. I don't know any perfect marriages (except my own) but again this going and saying, “What is it that you're doing in your family? Why is it that your children seem so responsive to the Lord and so vibrant? How is it that you've successfully brought children up through the teenage years, and they're now following Christ?” I don't know what particular area that you may have need of. Maybe you're having a terrible time handling money with the one talent the Lord has given you. Or maybe there's no spiritual growth in your life and you've just kind of laid down and accepted that. The Lord says, “Are you willing to change? Are you willing to find out how to grow?” Talk to someone who is growing. Get alone with Christ, alone with the Lord.

It strikes me that in John 5, when Jesus came to the man who was lying at the Pool of Bethesda, he'd been lying there for thirty-eight years. The text of John 5 tells us: “When Jesus saw him, he knew he'd been lying there a long time. He said to him, ‘Do you want to be healed?’” Seeing him lying there a long time, He didn't take it for granted that just because he had laid there forever, he wanted to be healed. No, he got at his inner motivation first. If he wanted to be healed then the Lord would have the capacity to take his will and strengthen it with his healing power.

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This lazy person in the story which Jesus told also has a ready excuse for his actions. When the Lord comes to him and he confesses that he didn't do anything with the talent he was given, then he replies to the Lord, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you did not winnow. So I was afraid and I went and hid your talent in the ground."

Two things the Lord knows about that kind of excuse. First, the Lord didn't believe the excuse. And secondly, he intimated that the man himself didn't believe it. He said, "If you really believed that I was that kind of a hard landlord, surely you would have been out doing something with what I gave to you because if you really believed that, you would have acted." But the lazy person is willing to substitute excuses for getting to it and getting the Lord's work done.

So Paul is exhorting us in regard to zeal with the theme of "Do it now or get it done; don't be lazy." Don't be like the man with the one talent—who would come up with excuses, who was unwilling to change, who had a low sense of self-worth.

But Paul then goes on to give a positive side to fervent love. Having described what it's not, he describes for us what it is. It is translated in Romans 12:11 as being "aglow with the Spirit."

Again Paul is using very tight wording in the language which he writes. He literally says, "In the Spirit, fervent." Or, "In regard to the Spirit, fervent."

II. Or, "Be fervent in respect to the Spirit."

Fervent is a term which comes from a word meaning "to boil" or "to seethe." If you were, for example, to use the word "fervent" for water—have you ever called water "fervent"? Fervent water is boiling water, just as fervent love is boiling love. There's no use telling water to get hot if you don't put it on a stove.

Sometimes I really believe we may do wrong by admonishing believers, "Do better for the Lord," and we don't say where and how they can do better for the Lord. So Paul is saying here in

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regard to love, in regard to the Spirit, be fervent. There's a qualification on the word "fervent" as applied to Christian love. That is, we are to be fervent in the Spirit.

Going to Yugoslavia, the closer the plane got, the more excited I became. Especially as we began flying over part of the Alps crossing over into Yugoslavia. We were about thirty, forty thousand feet in the air. I looked down on the mountains, and I knew it would just be a matter of moments before that Yugoslavia airliner landed In Yugoslavia. I was tremendously excited. But I was excited in the airplane. Had I chosen, at that moment, to take my excitement and exit out the rear door of the airplane, I would still have been very excited, but not for very long. It would be silly, and it would be dangerous, to try to get excited outside the airplane.

The same goes for fervency in the Spirit. The fervency is locked in the Spirit. That is where our excitement is to take place. In order to feel how to be fervent, one only has to ask, "What is the Spirit really fervent about?" Then, when you know what the Spirit is fervent about, then you can open your life to be really fervent in respect to your own ambitions and goals. What is the Spirit fervent about?

If I were to start with myself and work outward, which I would encourage you to do, I would locate these kinds of things that the Spirit is very fervent about. The Spirit is very fervent about breathing the life of Jesus into me. He has a simple goal, which began a new birth when he gave to me the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. He wants to, in my life, reproduce the character of Jesus so that my disposition, my habits, my speech, my conduct are representative of what the Lord himself would be. It is Christ living in me. So if I'm getting excited, I don't start by getting excited by something great that is going on out there. I first look within to see what the Spirit is excited about in my own life, breathing Jesus into me.

It may be as I concentrate on that for a moment, I recognize that within my life there is a part of my life which has atrophied, which has been disobedient and resistant to what the Spirit has been

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saying. A person can be perfectly well in body, but can have one limb that has atrophied. Like, for example, the man with the withered hand in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark 3:5, Jesus said to him, “Stretch forth your hand.” It was that one part of him that wasn’t working, but it was that one part that Jesus was interested in restoring.

I found the Spirit has continued to speak to me, especially in the last week, and has been uncovering some areas in my own life that I had completely forgotten about. Decisions that I had entered into without proper motivation—in fact, with absolutely wrong motivation. And the Lord was saying to me, “I’ve let that exist. You haven’t really sought me in that area before, but now I’m opening that area to you, and are you going to repent of your motivations for that particular decision. Are you going to let that area of your life come alive? Are you going to be fervent about what I want to do in your life and take the Scripture, ‘Be holy as I am holy’ to heart?” The Spirit of Jesus is fervent about breathing Christ’s life into me and fervent about breathing His life into you. When we begin to sense that, then we know that beyond us, the Spirit is then concerned about breathing the life of Jesus into our family. You may be in a family situation that is very tremendous, and you see that the Spirit is alive in the members of your family. You may be in a situation where you’re called upon to have faith that God will do something in a very difficult time.

The Lord gave me this Scripture for you today as I was pondering this from a chapter of Ezekiel. He let me see a picture maybe of some of the families that are among us today. Families that are like Ezekiel’s vision of dry bones (Ezekiel 37). You look at those and you hear the Lord saying to you, “Son of man, can these bones live? Son of man can this family come alive? Can the Spirit of Jesus be breathed?” And the response of Ezekiel is your response, “Lord God, thou knowest.” Then the Lord goes on to say, “Thus says the Lord to these bones, Behold, I will cause breath to enter you, and you will live.”

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So I'm fervent about seeing the Spirit of Jesus breathed into the life of my family. If we're fervent in the Spirit, we're concerned as well with the life of Jesus being breathed into this church and into the new church. Because we recognize that the Lord Jesus is present among us. Or shall we say, the more we recognize the Lord Jesus among us, the more truly we'll fulfill the purposes which He has, which are very simple?

Jesus is come in order to glorify God. Jesus is come in order to make disciples. Jesus is come in order to save the lost. Jesus is come in order to serve needs. The more that we're concerned with the life of the Spirit in us, the more we'll be concerned about these elements. Jesus is concerned about His Spirit being breathed into the world.

So to be fervent in Spirit is to really be concerned with carrying His gospel to others. I have looked at the subject of evangelism and recognized more and more, in a pastoring context, how it is that God designed for evangelism to take place in the Church. When evangelism first took place on the Day of Pentecost, Acts 2, there was already a base of discipleship that had been formed. One hundred and twenty persons had been collected, and they were in vital relationship already with one another. That base of people had been collected. Then the invitation began to go out in large numbers: "Come in." Why was it that a base needed to be collected before the first message went out in its expansive powers? It's because, simply, that the Lord, in inviting people to himself, wants more than simply a belief in Him which is theological in scope. But He wants people to be brought into relationship with Him and with one another. And the way we catch this relationally is discovering one another. So it's not surprising to read in the Early Church how quickly they become intermeshed with one another's lives. And glorified God. And in the world, they were well spoken of because the world saw how much they loved one another.

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So we really have a goal in the new church, and in this church, to have the kind of relationships among one another that are satisfying. And that are deeply fulfilling. So, in regard to the Spirit, be fervent.

III. The third thing that Paul says is, “In regard to the Lord, be serving the Lord.”

Serving the Lord is, on one hand, the antidote to laziness. And on the other hand, it stimulates us to ardor. I was talking to Jewel last night. I said, “Who would you select as an illustration of someone who really serves the Lord?” She said, “Billy Graham.” I said, “Somebody we know.” She said, “My father.” I got to thinking about Jewel’s father and how a man whose story will never be told to the masses really served the Lord in kind of a quiet, profound way. If I were to have a model for life as a server of the Lord, I would select a person such as him who, when his little girls were two and two weeks old, his wife died. As I watched his life unfold in the brief years that I knew him—and it’s been six years now since he went to be with the Lord—I saw some qualities in his life of being a servant to the Lord.

A. One thing that I saw was he never grew bitter toward the Lord. I think that this is the problem that sometimes servants have with the Lord. I know persons who, for example, from time to time come into this church who’ve come from another church setting, where perhaps they have been very hurt. And they feel like they have been so wounded by a past experience that they can perhaps never trust themselves and risk to serve the Lord again with the same intensity they served Him somewhere else. There have been experiences happen in the Christian’s life where things have not gone exactly right, and maybe it is even in regard to a specific request of the Lord that has been made. The Lord hasn’t answered prayer like we wanted Him to answer it. To that we say, “Lord, I know you’re God and I’m going to serve You, but I’m never going to quite do it with the same intensity that I did it before.” You may not make that kind of overstatement,

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but it's a sort of hidden subtlety of spirit. We've kind of grown at a distance to the Lord and said, "Lord, we really wish You hadn't handled that situation that way."

I think of my father-in-law, who could have said this on the death of his wife, leaving behind for him a little girl, two, and little twin daughters. But he had a spirit which the prophet Habakkuk expresses when Habakkuk wrestles with this same question of, "Can I continue to serve God when he doesn't come through as I've wanted him to do?" And Habakkuk's statement was this: "Though the fig tree does not blossom nor fruit be on the vine, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls. Yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will joy in the God of my salvation" (3:17-18). A deep quality of relating and trusting in the Lord, regardless of the circumstances. Being able to say, with Paul, even in an imprisonment situation, "I can do all things through Christ."

The servant of the Lord is not dependent upon the enthusiasm and the emotion of the moment, but has that deep attitude of serving the Lord and trusting in Him no matter what.

B. I think another character in my father-in-law's quality of serving the Lord is that he never turned to self-pity or escape. He never said, "Look at how cruelly the world has treated me. I'm here alone taking care of these three little girls." Instead, he recognized that he had a task to do. He moved in what resources he could to take care of them. He worked two jobs cutting hair and working in the Dan River Mill for thirty years, forty to fifty hours a week, bailing large things together. He was a thin person. The way the mill treated him was awful, the years they took advantage of him without proper insurance, hospitalization, and anything like that. Yet I never heard a word of complaint or lament slip his lips. It was quiet duty he had, a sort of unseen quality. He kept serving the Lord regardless.

He didn't escape in a bottle. He didn't escape in a fantasy life. He just kept at it, serving the Lord, doing his responsibility. He was steadfast in duty, and he served as best he could. He felt,

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for example, that one of the things he could do in addition to his working and bringing up his girls was, from time to time, be a lay preacher, and maybe even, on occasion, take out his guitar and strum it and sing. He couldn't sing too well. He preached even less well. But he would pitch a little tent on his property on the farm where they lived, and from time to time he'd hold a brush arbor service and gather together such people as he could to hear the gospel. He did what he could. It wasn't anything great in terms of what the world looks at. It'll never be written up in a history book. But when he stood in the presence of the Lord, the Lord, I'm sure, addressed him with the words, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

As those friends of ours who are going to start this new church have discovered, and will discover, most of the responsibilities we take on in the kingdom of God are quiet responsibilities. One of our relationship temptations in regard to serving the Lord is to let, sometimes, a person who isn't all that we thought they were discourage us. We look at the discrepancy between what we thought and what they were and we can say, "If that's what it's like, count me out." We can become disillusioned by circumstances.

Or maybe sometimes, in the smallness of a new thing which God is doing, we need to hear the Word of the Lord: "Don't despise the day of small things. If you're faithful in little, I'll make you faithful over much."

In this church, those who serve are not serving the board of deacons. Those who serve are not serving the pastor. And I deplore the term "my church." This is not my church. This is God's church. We are not even serving one another in that sense. Our ultimate service is to the Lord. Inasmuch as we have done it unto one of the least of these, we have done it unto Christ. Serving the Lord is what is the foundational principle on which we build our life.

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Serving the Lord, on the one hand, keeps us from being lazy. Because it is Him that we're serving. Then, on the other hand, it regulates and forms our zeal. We want to do it because it is unto Him.

Two weeks ago, on Super Bowl Sunday, I had planned, since there was no other event on the calendar, to set aside a portion of the afternoon to watch the Super Bowl. But just before kickoff time, Dr. and Mrs. Orr, who are our houseguests, were getting ready to visit an old friend of theirs. As they were going out the door, Mrs. Orr said to my wife, "Would you like to go along with us to meet our friend?" It so turned out that the friend that they were going to see was Corrie ten Boom. Immediately, I had a set of values to consider: watching the Super Bowl or meeting Corrie ten Boom. That wasn't even a hard choice. I switched off the Super Bowl right away. To have a chance to meet Corrie ten Boom—whose books I have read—to have a chance to meet this great lady was an amazing opportunity. It really struck me how, when we come to meet the Lord, when that actual moment arrives, we've got the chance—as much as we are afraid of death—when that moment comes to us, we'll say, "Yes! I'd rather be doing that right now than anything if we are being summoned into His presence."

In that brief hour with Corrie ten Boom that afternoon, I kind of found her as the person she really was in the books and in the movies. She looked the same. There were no facial touch-ups that had been done in the photographs. She just looked exactly like she was represented to be. She talked with the same kind of alertness and humility that her eighty-six years represented. That beautiful Dutch humor as her and Dr. Orr talked about old friends in the past. Just the gracious winsomeness in her life. I thought, "She's so representative of the Lord, and also the Apostle Paul in this respect. That all you've heard about them is really true when you meet them." Then as we were getting ready to leave, she said she wanted to give us a book, *In My*

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Father's House, and she inscribed it: "To George and Jewel, from Corrie ten Boom. Jesus is victor."

That book is always going to be treasured in our family. It would have been treasured if we'd have just bought it in a bookstore, but it has a special meaning now because it was given to us personally and inscribed. We know the author. Something like how Scriptures can become living to us when we know the Author and we're going to meet the Author one day as well.

But as I read the book, it's the story of Corrie ten Boom's first fifty years. Years before *The Hiding Place*. I kind of, along with everyone else, thought that along about at the age of fifty years, God, in the sovereign mystery of His will, looked down and selected at random Corrie ten Boom to go through this experience of the concentration camp and write books and produce literature that would bless the Christian world. But it wasn't quite that easy. Corrie ten Boom was not born at the age of fifty. As I found by reading in this book, God took fifty years to lay the foundations in her life. She says in this book if she'd have died at the age of fifty, before *The Hiding Place*, she'd have felt very prepared to meet the Lord, and I believe she would have. You see the life of what one person does, with the zeal of the Lord—not being, lazy but being fervent in the Spirit and serving the Lord. Then all of a sudden, to that foundation of her life God chose in the last years of her life to build an incredible superstructure upon it. So she finally even began her public ministry after her imprisonment when she was sixty-five years of age. For the last twenty-one years, she has been ministering. That gives me courage. If she didn't begin until sixty-five, maybe I have not either.

Why do I mention that? Because, at the back of everything, God is doing. And as we today launch this new church in Huntington Beach, we recognize that before anything becomes visible in the eyes of the world or becomes even what we would call significant in the Kingdom, it is

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preceded by long, intensive, quiet moments of simply serving the Lord. Of being unflagging in zeal. Of being fervent in the spirit.

It's up to the Lord to prosper and promote and single out. That's His responsibility, not mine. My responsibility, our church's responsibility, is simply, in regard to zeal, not be lazy. In regard to the Spirit, be fervent. In regard to the Lord, serve. And keep doing what God has called us to do.

As we are faithful in the little things, God will add to that more responsibilities.