

12:9–21 MARKS OF THE TRUE CHRISTIAN

⁹Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit,^a serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.^b Never be wise in your own sight. ¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it^c to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

OVERVIEW: The reformers focus on three

^a Or fervent in the Spirit

^b Or give yourselves to humble tasks

^c Greek give place

things here: love, prayer and peace. Justified and loved by God, Christians must love their neighbor—even foreigners, the unlovable and their enemies. Christian love does not act with the expectation of compensation, for believing in a God who is no respecter of persons, believers should also be no respecter of persons (by God’s grace!). But this goes against our nature; therefore, our commentators commend constant prayer—in public and private, with our mouth and mind. Through prayer Christians commune with the Lord, casting all their burdens on him and receiving peace. “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1).

Paul admonishes us to strive for peace. The reformers stress the qualifiers “if possible” and “as far as it depends on you” (Rom 12:18). Peace must not come at the cost of the church’s faith, our neighbor’s well-being or the state’s order. Peace at such a high price is sin. However, barring these exceptions, we are commanded not to insist on our rights, to remember that judgment is the Lord’s jurisdiction and that the Lord alone knows the heart.

12:9–13 *Be Diligent and Fervent in Love*

LOVE WITHOUT APPEARANCES. THE ENGLISH ANNOTATIONS: Now he comes to the duties of the second table, which he

derives from charity, which is the foundation of them all. He describes it as sincerity, hatred of evil, earnest study of good things and good affection to help our neighbor. It can be asked why the apostle here added the epithet “sincere,” or without dissimulation, to love rather than to other virtues. The answer is twofold. It is either because they are all comprised in love, or because there is almost no person who does not make some show of love or friendship to their neighbor without some kind of secret rancor or malice in their heart. ANNOTATIONS OF ROMANS 12:9.¹

GENUINE LOVE PROCEEDS FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT. TILEMANN HESSHUS: Up to this point he has been teaching bishops, teachers and governors of the church. Now he also teaches how individual hearers and believers ought to be eager for virtue. And he begins first with sincere love. This is the bond of perfection and truly is the foundation for the other virtues. Love for one’s neighbor is commanded in the second table, which is summarized in the words “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The world too often holds in front of itself the love for one’s neighbor, but all things in the world are feigned by artificial means, kept under wraps and painted in false colors. Nothing is sincere, nothing is pure. Thus the proverb has been coined:

“Flee those whom you believe to be trustworthy and you will be safe.” Similarly, *memnēson apistein* [“Remember not to trust anyone”]. And the godly ought to be strangers to every form of pretense and to hate the embellishment of a painted candor. They must reflect that God searches the heart. And the love of the godly ought to proceed from the Holy Spirit, for in the Spirit nothing is faked or feigned.

It is a general commandment that he says: “Oppose evil; cling to the good.” For when we see all dishonest and base deeds—not only external high crimes, but also internal hidden deceits and evil activities, as they call them—he wants us to the contrary to join ourselves to whatever is praiseworthy, good, honorable and godly. And let us never allow ourselves to be moved from zeal for true virtue. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 12:9.²

LOVE ONE ANOTHER! TILEMANN HESSHUS: He repeats the commandment about true love, for love is the root of all duties. He says, let there be such love among you Christians as there usually is among brothers who share the same mother. For if nature itself kindles such sparks of mutual love among brothers and kinsfolk, how much greater sparks of love ought the Holy Spirit to kindle, since we

¹Downname, ed., *Annotations*, CCC1r*.

² Hesshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 379v.

have been given a second birth by him and adopted as sons of God. COMMENTARY ON [ROMANS 12:10](#).³

DO NOT BE LAZY IN SHOWING LOVE. MARTIN LUTHER: Note how love keeps nothing for itself and seeks only those things that are in the interest of others. He has taught us above how we ought to bestow our goods and talents for the benefit of others, namely, by contributing, by showing mercy, by showing love and so forth, and then how we should bestow honor and good report among ourselves. Now he teaches that one should offer himself, saying that to help, to serve and to succor with our own body, so to speak, is to support and stand by those who are in need. On the other side are the Absalomites, that is, the fathers of peace and those who are not willing to be disturbed and helpful over the needs of others. If they do something, they do it unwillingly and grudgingly, as we see in legal actions, lawsuits and the like. Those who snore and yawn and are lukewarm in all their efforts are the people who break this command, and they achieve nothing by their works but only dissipate them. People of this kind are also hateful to human beings, to say nothing of God. SCHOLIA ON [ROMANS 12:11](#).⁴

³ Hesshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 38or.

⁴ LW 25:455–56* (WA 56:463); citing 2 Sam 13:22; Prov 18:9.

SERVING TIME OR THE LORD? THE ENGLISH ANNOTATIONS: In some editions, it is not *kyriō* but *kairō*, that is, serving the time. We might not understand this reading if the apostle called us to be temporizers, and to apply ourselves to the corrupt customs and manners of the times. Instead, the apostle’s exhortation is for us to be timely in all our actions and to undertake them at the most appropriate occasion, as he exhorts elsewhere, to walk wisely toward outsiders, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. But in the most ancient copy of Thecla, and generally in most correct editions, the word is not *kairō*, but *kyriō*, not the time but the Lord.⁵ And the meaning is that we should have no other aim or scope in all our actions than his service, and whatsoever our employment be, we are to consider with all diligence, as servants of the Lord, what his service and honor requires. ANNOTATIONS ON [ROMANS 12:11](#).⁶

HOPE. TILEMANN HESSHUS: Hope is a virtue of the first commandment, by which we strengthen ourselves in adversities by confidence in divine mercy, seek and await a lessening of our troubles as God wills, and consider based on God’s

⁵ Thecla, a fourth-century Egyptian martyr, is often cited as the scribe for the *Codex Alexandrinus*, which contains the LXX and much of the New Testament.

⁶ Downname, ed., *Annotations*, CCC1r*; citing Col 4:5; Eph 5:16; Ps 2:11; Eph 6:7.

promises that we certainly will be freed from all troubles. It is said about Stephen: “He went triumphant in spirit and lessened his losses by his hope.”⁷ COMMENTARY ON [ROMANS 12:12](#).⁸

BE CONSTANT IN PRAYER. MARTIN LUTHER: This is spoken in opposition to those who read the Psalms without any heart. We must be on our guard that the prayers of the church do not become more of a hindrance than a help. First, because we offend God more by reading them when our heart is not in it, and second, because we are deceived and made secure by the appearance of these things as if we had truly prayed properly. Thus we will never become attached to the desire for true prayer, but when we pray these things, we think we have prayed and are in need of nothing more. This is a terrible danger. And in return for these things we then at our leisure and in security consume the income and the pensions and the subsidies of the people!

This is the reason he inserted the word “constant,” a great watchword that must be noted and respected by all, and especially by clerics. This word signifies that we must put real work into our praying, and it is not in vain, as the ancient fathers

⁷ This is a famous line from Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), an influential Italian cardinal and poet.

⁸ Heshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 382r.

have said, “There is no work like praying to God.”⁹ Therefore when a man wants to enter the priesthood, he must first consider that he is entering a work that is harder than any other, namely, the work of prayer. For this requires a subdued and broken mind and an elevated and victorious spirit. But at this point the lawyers introduce a nice explanation, that to pray the hours is not commanded, but rather to “read” them or to “say” them is. For in this manner they encumber the canon law with words and snore on in peace. But even if we omit the canonical hours, we need to say something about prayer.

Prayer is of two kinds. There is the vocal prayer, of which it is presently the custom to say that a virtual intention is sufficient—a nice cover for laziness and negligence!¹⁰ For on the basis of this, in the first place, they must by force tear from themselves the good intention, and then being satisfied with this, they give up every other attempt.

And in this type of prayer there is a threefold attentiveness: the material (or sensual) attentiveness, whereby one pays attention only to the words, as monks and others such as simple laypeople do, who

⁹ *Vitae Patrum V, Verba Seniorum XII*, 2 (PL 73:941).

¹⁰ Luther uses the twofold Scholastic classification of prayer: *oratio vocalis* and *oratio mentalis*; that is, prayers spoken out loud (for example, in worship) and prayers spoken in the heart (for example, in private devotion).

do not understand even the Lord's Prayer. And this is real prayer no more than the material is the real thing, that is, according to its own nature, it is not prayer in the proper sense of the word, but only in an extrinsic sense, by which every other good work can be called prayer. To pray in this way is merely to perform an act of obedience, which makes it pleasing to God. Such prayer is not to be despised, and it is good in many other ways. First, because it drives away the devil, even if only recited in the simplicity of the heart, that is, if "it is sung in the Spirit" and thus brings the Holy Spirit to us. This is symbolized in David's playing the harp before Saul, for the devil cannot endure even having the Word of God read, as we know from many examples. "For one who speaks in a tongue speaks to God." Second, because the divine word by nature affects the soul, even if it is not understood, for it is a word of grace, as we read in [Psalm 45](#): "Grace is poured on your lips." ... Third, it gives to the intellect and the emotions an occasion that they would not have otherwise, as we see it symbolized in the minstrel of Elisha. Fourth, although many people who pray this way do not have the full emotional effect of these words, yet they often have a common and elevated spirit toward God.

There is also the intellectual attentiveness, whereby one gives attention to the sense and meaning of the words. The better educated and intelligent must pay

attention to this, for each must pay his talent to God.

Then there is the spiritual or emotional attentiveness, whereby one is attentive to the emotional or spiritual effect of the words, as when one laments with those who lament, rejoices with those who rejoice, shouts for joy with those who are shouting for joy and accommodates oneself to every moment of the words. This is true prayer. Of these two points the apostle says, "I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the mind also." By using the expression to "sing with the spirit" he is calling attention to the sensual attentiveness, apart from intellectual attentiveness, which is intimately connected with emotional attentiveness, as in the case of devout nuns and uneducated people. By using the expression "to sing with the mind" he is describing the intellectual attentiveness, which can be aroused both with and without the spirit. The mental prayer is the ascent of the mind, as well as the spirit, to God. This is the prayer of which the apostle is speaking here when he says: "Be constant in prayer." In this passage he is emphasizing that Christians should engage in frequent as well as diligent prayer, for "to be constant" means not only to take a great deal of time, but also to urge, to incite, to demand. Just as there is no work for which Christians ought to be more frequent, so no other work requires more labor and effort and therefore is more

efficacious and fruitful. For here “the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force.” For prayer in my opinion is a constant violent action of the spirit as it is lifted up to God, as a ship driven upward against the power of a storm....

This violence decreases and disappears, to be sure, whenever the Spirit draws and carries our heart upward by grace, or surely, when a present and major anxiety compels us to take refuge in prayer. And without these two factors, prayer becomes a most difficult and tedious thing, but its effect is tremendous. For true prayer is omnipotent, as our Lord says: “For everyone who asks receives,” etc. Thus we must all practice violence and remember that he who prays is fighting against the devil and the flesh. SCHOLIA ON [ROMANS 12:12](#).¹¹

THE NECESSITY OF PRAYER. JOHN CALVIN: It is therefore by the benefit of prayer that we reach those riches which are laid up for us with the heavenly Father. For there is a communion of people with God by which, having entered the heavenly sanctuary, they appeal to God in person concerning God’s promises in order to experience where necessity so demands, that what they believed was not in vain,

¹¹ [LW 25:458–61](#)* ([WA 56:465–68](#)); citing [Mt 15:8](#); [Mk 7:6](#); [Is 29:13](#); [1 Cor 14:15](#); [1 Sam 16:23](#); [1 Cor 14:2](#); [Ps 45:2](#); [Song 4:11](#); [2 Kings 3:14–15](#); [1 Cor 14:15](#); [Mt 11:12](#); [7:8](#).

although God had promised it in word alone. Therefore we see that to us nothing is promised to be expected from the Lord that we are not also bidden to ask of God in prayer. So true is it that we dig up by prayer the treasures that were pointed out by the Lord’s gospel, and that our faith has gazed on. Words fail to explain how necessary prayer is, and in how many ways the exercise of prayer is profitable. Surely with good reason our heavenly Father affirms that the only stronghold of safety is in calling on God’s name. By so doing we invoke the presence both of God’s providence, through which God sustains us, weak as we are and well-nigh overcome, and of God’s goodness, through which we are received, miserably burdened with sins, unto grace: and in short, it is by prayer that we call on God to be wholly present to us. Hence comes an extraordinary peace and repose to our consciences. For having disclosed to the Lord the necessity that was pressing on us, we even rest fully in the thought that none of our ills is hidden from God, who we are convinced has both the will and the power to take the best care of us. [INSTITUTES 3.20.2](#).¹²

PERSEVERE IN PRAYER. TILEMANN HESSHUS: Calling on God is a virtue of the second commandment, by which we flee in Spirit and truth to the eternal Father and by

¹² [LCC 20:851](#)* ([CO 2:625–26](#)); citing [Joel 2:32](#).

trusting in the Redeemer Jesus Christ we see spiritual and physical goods from God and we consider it certain that God will truly hear us. This is our refuge in every need, as Solomon says, “The name of the Lord is a most mighty tower; the righteous flees to it and is delivered.”

Genuine calling on God is not merely one among the greatest virtues, but is also the virtue most needed. And because in the church alone this highest form of worship is offered to God, Paul diligently exhorts the church to practice this calling on God. But he warns us to persevere constantly in prayer, for many people fall away from God because they are not heard at once; they leave off praying with the result that they toil in vain and seek other, forbidden aid or fall into despair. Such a falling away is a manifest sign that their faith was not sincere or was not built on a solid foundation. For it is customary for God to delay help and liberation for some time so that he may test our faith so that then he may have a notable opportunity to show more clearly his kindness and love toward us. And so God trains our patience and obedience.

Therefore Paul commands us to persevere in prayer, as it is said in [Psalm 27](#): “Wait for the Lord; be bold, and let your heart be strong, and wait for the Lord.” COMMENTARY ON [ROMANS 12:12](#).¹³

¹³ Hesshus, *Explicatio Epistolae Pauli ad Romanos*, 382r–v; citing [Prov 18:10](#); [Ps 27:14](#).

ADVICE FOR AFFLICTION. WOLFGANG MUSCULUS: These commands pertain entirely to times of affliction, and they advise how Christians should handle themselves—not only among themselves, but also toward other Christians subject to afflictions. But if affliction breaks out, first patience is necessary to preserve our spirits. Second, by attentive prayer to God, we beg for God’s aid, that he not allow us to be surrounded by the plots of our enemies, but instead that he protect us everywhere. And if anything else be needed in affliction, that we ask for this from God, whether it be firmness of faith or hope or patience or steadfastness of spirit or providence to avoid the trickery of Satan, etc. Finally it is necessary that even if we are without afflictions, still, we should lift up the needs of the saints, namely, those who are in affliction. He does what he says here. “Sharing the needs of the saints”: that is, the needs of the brothers are the same as our own worries. COMMENTARY ON [ROMANS 12:12–13](#).¹⁴

CARE FOR THE LEAST AMONG YOU. JOHN CALVIN: He returns to the duties of love, the chief of which is to do good to those from whom we expect the least recompense. As it commonly happens that those who more than others are pressed

¹⁴ Musculus, *In epistolam Apostoli Pauli ad Romanos commentarii*, 218.

down with want and stand in need of help are especially despised (for the benefits conferred on them are regarded as lost), God recommends them to us in a special manner. It is indeed then only that we prove our love to be genuine, when we relieve needy brothers for no other reason than that of exercising our benevolence. Now hospitality is not one of the least acts of love; that is, that kindness and liberality which are shown toward strangers, for they are for the most part destitute of all things, being far away from their friends. He therefore distinctly recommends this to us. We hence see that the more neglected anyone commonly is by people, the more attentive we ought to be to their wants. COMMENTARY ON ROMANS 12:13.¹⁵

CONSIDER OTHERS BETTER THAN YOURSELF. JOHN CALVIN: Now in these words we perceive that denial of self has regard partly to people, partly, and chiefly, to God. For when Scripture bids us act toward others so as to esteem them above ourselves, and in good faith to apply ourselves wholly to doing them good, it gives us commandments of which our mind is quite incapable unless our mind be previously emptied of its natural feeling. For such is the blindness with which we all rush into self-love that each one of us seems to himself to have just cause to be proud of

himself and to despise all others in comparison. If God has conferred on us anything of which we need not repent, relying on it we immediately lift up our minds, and are not only puffed up but almost burst with pride. The very vices that infest us we take pains to hide from others, while we flatter ourselves with the pretense that they are slight and insignificant, and even sometimes embrace them as virtues. If others manifest the same endowments we admire in ourselves, or even superior ones, we spitefully belittle and revile these gifts in order to avoid yielding place to such persons. If there are any faults in others, not content with noting them with severe and sharp reproach, we hatefully exaggerate them. Hence arises such insolence that each one of us, as if exempt from the common lot, wishes to tower above the rest, and loftily and savagely abuses every mortal human being, or at least looks down on them as inferior. The poor yield to the rich; the common folk, to the nobles; the servants, to their masters; the unlearned, to the educated. But there is no one who does not cherish within themselves some opinion of their own preeminence.

Thus each individual, by flattering themselves, bears a kind of kingdom in their breast. For claiming as their own what pleases them, they censure the character and morals of others. But if this comes to the point of conflict, their venom bursts forth. For many obviously

¹⁵ CTS 38:467* (CO 49:242–43).

display some gentleness so long as they find everything sweet and pleasant. But just how many are there who will preserve this even tenor of modesty when they are pricked and irritated? There is no other remedy than to tear out from our inward parts this most deadly pestilence of love of strife and love of self, even as it is plucked out by scriptural teaching. For thus we are instructed to remember that those talents which God has bestowed on us are not our own goods but the free gifts of God; and any persons who become proud of them show their ungratefulness. “Who causes you to excel?” Paul asks. “If you have received all things, why do you boast as if they were not given to you?”

Let us, then, unremittingly examining our faults, call ourselves back to humility. Thus nothing will remain in us to puff us up; but there will be much occasion to be cast down. On the other hand, we are bidden so to esteem and regard whatever gifts of God we see in others that we may honor those human beings in whom they reside. For it would be great depravity on our part to deprive them of that honor which the Lord has bestowed on them. But we are taught to overlook their faults, certainly not flatteringly to cherish them; but not on account of such faults to revile those whom we ought to cherish with good will and honor. Thus it will come about that whatever person we deal with, we shall treat them not only moderately

and modestly but also cordially and as a friend. You will never attain true gentleness except by one path: a heart imbued with lowliness and with reverence for others. [INSTITUTES 3.7.4](#).¹⁶

¹⁶ [LCC 20:693–94*](#) ([CO 2:508–9](#)); citing [Phil 2:3](#); [1 Cor 4:7](#).