

Serving the Lord with Zeal
Romans 12:11-12
10/19/25

Prayer

How do we maintain our zeal for serving the Lord when life gets hard? How can we fix our eyes on Christ when our circumstances seem overwhelming? How can a branch bear fruit in the middle of a drought?

We've been exploring Paul's description of a living sacrifice found in Romans 12 and today we will unpack the description found in verses 11-12. As Paul said, in response to God's mercy, we are empowered to live in this way. Romans 12:11-12.

¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

While this looks like six different commands, it is actual one Spirit-empowered lifestyle that contains six different elements. To pull this all together I want to begin with what is in the very center of verse 12—be patient in affliction.

Patient in Affliction

Be patient. This is a good translation of the original Greek Paul used, but it does not quite carry the full scope of the word *hupomone*.

Hupomone has to do with expressing patient endurance in the midst of a difficult trial. You know something better is coming so you are not going to give up. You will hold on and wait for the good that you know will arrive.

Our fallen world will help us practice this kind of patience every day. If you have lived long enough you have experienced some form of trial or affliction. Many in this room are in the thick of it right now. If you are not, just wait, you will be. When it hits, what will help you patiently endure to the end?

The word for affliction (*thlipsis*) carries the idea of squeezing, compressing or crushing. John used this word in his gospel when he quotes Jesus saying, "In this world you will have trouble/affliction/crushing. But take heart! I have overcome the world."ⁱ

Affliction, trouble, distress and sorrow are natural companions in this fallen world. But we do not have to face them alone. The prophet Isaiah calls Jesus the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. The author of Hebrews tells us

During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.

Jesus was very familiar with suffering. He experienced the full force of this world's afflictions, overcame them all and now walks with us as we go through trouble together.

While the timing may be different for each of us, when the affliction reaches a certain level of intensity we all cry out to someone. For people of faith, that means we cry out to God in prayer. It is no accident that "be faithful in prayer" follows right after "be patient in affliction."

Faithful in Prayer. Devoted to Prayer

Trouble drives us to pray. When things are good, prayer often becomes an afterthought. But when things are hard, we know our vulnerability, feel our weakness and so cry out to both complain and ask for help.

The word faithful here can also be translated as devoted and it is no accident that this word is often found beside the word prayer.ⁱⁱ Be devoted to prayer. Even in the face of difficulty, make prayer your determined effort.

When we think of prayer we often focus on the words we say. In the Book of Psalms we find great examples of the words others have used in prayer. There we find words of exuberant praise, of crying out for help and of confidence in God even in the midst of trial. These are prayers filled with faith and hope, they are examples of patient endurance.

But there are two Psalms God included that stand out for their difference. Psalm 88 and 39 are unique in that the psalmists are in absolute despair. Psalm 88 closes with the words, "Darkness is my closest friend."

Psalm 39 closes with this request made of God: "Look away from me, that I may rejoice again before I depart and am no more." How bad do things have to be for someone to say to God, "Darkness is a better friend than you." Or "leave me alone so I can be happy before I die."

While we can ponder how bad things have to be for someone to say such things there is another side of that coin. We can also ask, how loving does God have to be to invite us to speak those words to Him. Think of this. God included these words in the Psalms as examples of one way we can cry out to him with loud cries and tears.

This is prayer in its most raw and painful form. These words feel wrong and out of place, maybe even blasphemous. And they would be if not for one thing. These words are spoken directly to God.

If these words are thrown into the wind as a complaint or hung out on social media for the world to see they'd be terribly dishonoring to the Lord. But this pain and complaint is expressed directly to God in prayer.

I believe it is this one sliver of faith that makes all the difference. The words make it seem like the person is done with God, but the prayer is that sliver of faith that says otherwise. This is real life, and God invites us to bring it straight to Him.

The prayers we read in Psalms 88 and 39 are not the last word. Even though the events that inspired these prayers felt unbearable and never-ending to the authors, both psalmists came out of that season of affliction and continued to praise God.

In fact, the psalmist who closed his prayer by telling God to “leave me alone so I can be happy before I die” started another with “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from Him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken” (62:1).

Did God use the affliction to forge within them such a deep and enduring faith? Probably. The Welsh pastor and author, Selwyn Hughes, once said, “Whatever of Christ’s love and compassion flows through my life, has largely come about through suffering.”

We know prayer is not a tool we use to get us out of trouble; it is the very air we breathe. This is why time and time again the scriptures call us to be devoted to prayer. It is not about pulling it out in an emergency; it is about living it out in our day-to-day lives.

Prayer is one of those places where our minds are renewed because we review the promises God has given to us. As we pray through God’s Word the Spirit works to transform us and anchor us to the hope we have received.

Devotion to prayer is essential. More than a task we squeeze into the schedule, prayer is a lifestyle we do without ceasing. Rather than an activity that is tacked onto our day, it is one of the threads that are woven into the fabric of our lives.

We can’t live off of yesterday’s food. We can’t address today’s headache with yesterday’s aspirin. It is today’s prayers that supply what we need for today’s afflictions. Our troubles are expressed, and God’s mercies are realized, through prayer.

Faithfulness in prayer will look different for each person. While there is no singular standard that defines devotion for everyone, there is one common thread for us all—we are all to be growing in our devotion to prayer.

For some, devotion in prayer might be to pray one time each day for 30 seconds. It might be limited to expressing sincere thanks before a meal or the regular use of a prayer app on their phone.

On the other end of the spectrum are those for whom prayer is an ongoing, two-way conversation with the living God. At its heart prayer is not about dumping our requests and complaints at God’s feet before we run out the door and get busy with the next thing. Prayer is ultimately a conversation between us and God, one that includes listening.

When it comes to faithfulness in prayer, the important thing is not to identify where you are but to set a course for where you will be.

How are you stretching yourself in prayer today? Are you growing in your devotion to it? Do you practice it? Read about it? Discuss it with your family and friends? Are you intentionally branching out to increase your experience in prayer? What is the next step you want to take that will move you into deeper devotion in this life-sustaining practice?

As you consider your next step, please do not make it the clock. Assigning a number of minutes to your prayer time will put your focus on the clock instead of the Lord. Just engage your heart and pray until you pray. If you don't know what I mean, just try it and you will.

Patience in affliction and faithfulness in prayer are only possible when we understand the certainty of the hope we have received.

Joyful in Hope

I've shared before how biblical hope is not wishful thinking that may or may not be realized. I hope I pass the test. I hope I get the job. I hope Purdue will play in a bowl game this year.

The hope expressed in the Bible is anchored to the promise of God and since no purpose of God can be thwarted (Is 14:27), what we hope for will happen. Consider what Paul said in Romans 5:2-5.

² Because of our faith, Christ has brought us into this place of **undeserved privilege** where we now stand [this is his mercy and grace showered on us], and we confidently and joyfully look forward to sharing God's glory. [Sharing in God's glory is something that will happen for us. It is a certainty and so we live in this certain hope.]

³ We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and **trials** [this is *thlipsis*, the same word for affliction in today's passage], for we know that they help us develop **endurance** [this is *hupomone*]. ⁴ And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident **hope** of salvation. ⁵ And this **hope will not lead to disappointment**. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.

So many other passages speak of what is in store for those who have placed their trust in Christ and have given Him their allegiance as king. Our life in Christ is real and cannot be taken from us. Currently, the fullness of that life is hidden, but when Jesus appears and we see him as He is, then all that God has promised will be realized.ⁱⁱⁱ This is biblical hope.

In the same way that biblical hope is not wishful thinking, joy is not effervescent, bouncing-off-the-walls exuberance. From time to time it can be, but it is much deeper than that. At its core, biblical joy is a settled confidence in the goodness of God.

God is good. He will not change His mind or go back on His promises. That means that even when we are being squeezed and crushed we know that affliction does not have

the final word. Our joy is found in the character of God. It does not rest in the events of this present age or in the details of our present circumstances.

And so we come full circle. Affliction drives us to prayer. Prayer reminds us of the goodness of God to keep His promises. The resulting joy strengthens our endurance in the ongoing affliction.

It may seem like forever, but the suffering is just temporary. It may seem like God is absent as we pray with loud cries and tears, but He has experienced this too and now walks with us as a trusted advocate. And even in the face of insurmountable odds and terminal diagnosis, hope remains because God's goodness is certain and His promises are guaranteed.

Spiritual Zeal

The end result of all this is expressed in verse 11. Being joyful in hope, patient in affliction and faithful in prayer leads to spiritual zeal. Though this could refer to a personal fervor of spirit found in some energetic and extroverted person, the context leans toward this being a zeal for every Christian that comes from the Holy Spirit.

The zeal or spiritual fervor is an eager readiness to expend energy and effort in performing a task. Like a pot of water over the flame that starts tepid but grows to a rolling boil or like a copper bar placed in the furnace melts and begins to glow, let the Holy Spirit grow your enthusiasm for and commitment to the way of Christ.

Don't get ahead of the text here. This zeal is expressed through our joy in hope, endurance in affliction and devotion in prayer. I think Paul also intends that this zeal be expressed through every category Paul mentions in chapter 12.^{iv} This is the eager readiness that moves us to use our gifts, relate to one another and relate to those who persecute us in ways that are different from the pattern of this world.

Yes, zeal can be expressed in a loud display that grabs everyone's attention, as when Jesus cleansed the temple. But more importantly, the energy that flows from zeal is applied to life that follows our Lord's consistent example and teaching.

It is a readiness or eagerness to expend energy and effort to live out the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, to not lord our authority over others, to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.^v It is a zeal to serve the Lord as a living sacrifice.

Serving the Lord becomes the context within which we express this zeal for and commitment to the Lord's way.

Serve the Lord

What Paul is talking about here is more about being than doing. This is more about threads woven into the fabric of our being than tasks on our to do list. This is a life that is transformed by the renewing of the mind, a life that no longer follows the pattern of this world. This is living sacrifice worship, and when we consider the mercy showered upon us, it is the only reasonable response we can offer.

Did you notice something about the adjectives in our list? Joy. Patient. Faithful. These are some of the fruits that the Holy Spirit grows in our lives. They only appear in our lives over time as we abide together in the Vine of Christ.

This is not about abiding alone with Jesus. This is about abiding together with Jesus. Here is a truth statement I have carried with me for decades: Life is hard. God is good. We have each other. The Spirit of Jesus in you can minister to me and the spirit of Jesus in me can minister to you. In this way, we can be a tangible expression of the Lord's ministry to each other.

How do we maintain our zeal for serving the Lord when life gets hard? How can we fix our eyes on Christ when our circumstances seem so overwhelming? How can a branch bear fruit in the middle of a drought?

¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Worshipping the Lord as a living sacrifice.

Closing Prayer

This is all part of the grace and mercy you have showered upon us. You tell us to live up to what we have already attained. So, rather than wish we were somewhere else in our faith, help us start where we are. Help us act with what we have and then enjoy the growth and new fruit you will bring.

Deepen our settled confidence in your goodness so that our joy in your promises may grow. And let that joyful hope strengthen our endurance in affliction and let that affliction galvanize our devotion to prayer. And let all these be expressed in an eager readiness, a spiritual fervor that fuels our worship as a living sacrifice.

Open the eyes of our hearts that we might gain a clearer image of your love and goodness. And transform us into your image, for your glory alone. Amen.

ⁱ John 16:33; Cf Acts 14:22

ⁱⁱ Acts 1:14; 2:42; 6:4; Col 4:2; Eph 6:18, *proskartereo*

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 8:18-25; 1 Peter 1:3-9; 2 Corinthians 4:16-5:5; James 1; Colossians 3:1-4; 1 John 3:2-3

^{iv} Truth be told, it is only the fervor of the Holy Spirit in us that makes it possible for us to do all these things that Paul directs us toward in Romans 12. Apart from His power, such things would be impossible for us to even try.

^v British Scholar and Pastor Charles Cranfield said, "The real proof of the presence of this fire of the Spirit would be not effervescent religious excitement but renewed energy and determination in the humble and obedient service of the Lord Jesus. Cranfield, C. E. B. (2004). *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (p. 635). T&T Clark International.