

“I AM Has Sent Me to You”

Exodus 3:1-15 • Psalm 105:1-6, 23-26, 45b • Romans 12:9-21 • Matthew 16:21-28

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We've got a fabulous chapter in the story of Moses this week, but before we go there, let's take a few minutes to consider the passage from Romans 12 we heard a few minutes ago. Romans is, by far, the most complicated of Paul's letters, and the hardest to understand, but these thirteen verses are *incredibly* straightforward and *immensely* practical. This is some of Paul's best advice about what the Christian life is all about, what it *really* means to follow Jesus. Let's just walk through this line-by-line.

“Let love be genuine.” Don't fake it; let your love for other people be *real*. “Hate what is evil.” Do not support or condone *any* evil act by *any* person, no matter how close you are to them or how much you admire them. “Hold fast to what is good.” Always strive to be your absolute best self. “Love one another with mutual affection.” We are called to love our fellow Christians, no matter what. “Outdo one another in showing honor.” It's not a competition, but be as honorable to other people as you possibly can. “Do not lag in zeal.” Let your devotion and your commitment be fully present in all that you do. “Be ardent in spirit.” Let the Spirit of God work through you abundantly. “Serve the Lord.” Remember that our purpose in life is not to serve ourselves, but to serve God. “Rejoice in hope.” Even when all sorts of things are going wrong, hold onto the gospel *hope* that God promises. “Be patient in affliction.” Times of suffering and pain come to all of us sooner or later. Do your best to endure those times with grace and peace. “Persevere in prayer.” Keep praying, even if what you are praying for seems like it's never going to happen. “Contribute to the needs of the saints.” Look around for those in our church community who are in need, and, for God's sake, do what you can to help them. “Pursue hospitality to strangers.” Make the lonely and the lost feel welcome and at home.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” When people are cruel to you, try to find it in your heart to bless them with the love of God. That doesn't mean you have to condone their actions, but it is a reminder that your persecutor was, like you, created by God. “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” Don't be distant from other people; when someone you know is rejoicing, let your heart be joyful with them; when someone you know is despairing, let your heart be sad with them. “Live in harmony with one another.” Literally, this means “be of the same mind” with one another; work *together* for the common good. “Do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly.” Don't think that you're inherently *better than* or *superior to* any other person. Find common ground with the poor and the marginalized. “Do not claim to be wiser than you are.” Don't think that you've got all the answers. The wisest people on this planet are the ones who know that there is *so much* that they don't know. Be ready and willing to learn at all times. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” When someone does something really cruel to you, don't be cruel in return. Do what is *good* and *right* in the interests of all.

“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” That’s a tall order, especially when our world is as divided as it is right now. To the extent that you can, be at peace with everyone, even those with whom you vehemently disagree. “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.’” When you are wronged, don’t seek revenge. It’s not *our* job to be the judge, jury, and executioner of those who wrong us. Leave that to the authorities, and above all to God. “Instead, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’” Remember what Jesus said about “Love your enemies”? Paul’s giving some examples of what that looks like in actual practice. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” When you’ve been deeply, deeply hurt, don’t let evil thoughts take over your soul. Make sure that your *good* heart is in control, so that you give others the grace and peace of Jesus Christ.

Now I think this is a good time to tell you the story of the pastor who was new to a church and gave a really a really powerful, inspiring sermon on his first Sunday. Everyone loved it and told him how great a sermon it was. The next week, he gave another powerful and inspiring sermon, but some people were scratching their heads. A lot of it was sounding a bit ... familiar. The third week, people started to realize: wait, this is the exact same sermon he’s preached for the last two weeks! The leaders of the church approached him and said, “That’s a great sermon, preacher, but when are you going to give us a *new* one?” He answered: “When you all start *doing* what I told you to do the *first* week!”

My point: these are great words. Don’t let them just be *words*. Don’t think, “That all sounds really good, and it would be nice if I could actually live like that.” No. Stop your wishful thinking. Stop making excuses. Stop complaining about the speck in your neighbor’s eye and start looking at the log in your own eye. Start identifying the parts of your life and the ways you interact with other people that really don’t measure up to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. Which piece of everything I just read do you *most urgently need* to start doing? Identify something, and change your life – *today*.

Imagine a world where we all lived the way Jesus calls us to life. That world starts with you.

Now the message that Jesus preached was not welcome news to everybody. He lived an incredibly peace-filled life, but his message made enemies. He knew that the elders of the people, the chief priests, and the scribes all perceived him as a threat. He knew that he was going to die, and he also knew that God was not going to let him stay dead. So there came a point in his ministry when he started telling his disciples what was to come. He was trying to prepare them for the difficult road that lay ahead. Simon Peter pulls him aside and tells him not to say such things. Jesus utterly rejects Simon Peter’s words – this is the very same Simon Peter whom Jesus had just been praising not long before! – and tells his disciples that following him is going to come with a *cost*. If we want to follow Jesus – *truly* follow Jesus – we have to be willing to “deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him.” We have to *let go* of a lot of the things *we* care about, and give our primary attention instead to the things that *Jesus* cares about. A lot of us get stuck and never *really* take up our cross and follow him.

All right. Now, let’s go back to Moses. When we left Moses last week, he was being raised by the daughter of Pharaoh, being nursed by his own birth mother. Time has passed; Moses has grown up. He is now aware of the sufferings of his own Hebrew people, who have been enslaved by Pharaoh. One day, he saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew slave. Moses *killed* that Egyptian. That was how angry he was. (He hadn’t had an opportunity to hear the teachings of Jesus – this was thirteen centuries before that!) The next day, Moses learned that he had been seen, and so he ran, ran for his life, far, far away, into the desert. There, he is befriended by a Midianite priest named Jethro (or Reuel), and his seven daughters. Moses marries one of those daughters, Zipporah; they have a son, whom Moses

names Gershom, which means “alien” or “foreigner,” which is what Moses considered himself to be.

One day, “Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness and came to Mount Horeb, the mountain of God.” Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai; this is the mountain where God will appear in thunder to give the law to the Israelite people, 17 chapters later. It is believed to be this mountain, Jabal Musa, which stretches about 7,500 feet above sea level in the southern part of the Sinai peninsula. Here is a view from the summit. Moses does not climb the mountain yet. He just comes to the base of the mountain, where something incredible happens: “There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed.” Moses steps closer to inspect the bush, and then “God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’ And he said, ‘Here I am.’ Then he said, ‘Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.” This is what is called a *theophany* – a visible manifestation of a *god*. But not just *any* god – not an Egyptian god, nor a Midianite god – no, the God of Moses’ *own Hebrew people*. God says: “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

Why is God appearing to Moses? God explains: “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey....” God is answering the prayers of the people. God has a job for Moses to do. “Now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” Moses isn’t sure he’s up to the task: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” God’s answer: “I will be with you.” That’s really all Moses needs to know. Moses has a lot of questions – and a lot of objections to this plan – but the one critical thing that Moses needs is the presence of God. For with God “all things are possible.” (Matthew 19:26)

One question Moses asks is especially important: “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God answers: “I AM WHO I AM.” A number of Bible translations put those words in small caps. Why? Because this is, for all intents and purposes, the very *name* of God. In Hebrew it looks like this: אֲנִי הָאֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי – ‘*éyê ‘asher ‘éyê*. It can also be translated “I am what I am,” or “I will be what I will be.” In the book of Revelation, God is called the one “who is and who was and who is to come.” (Revelation 1:8) It’s the same concept. Sometimes we wonder, *who* – or *what* – is God, and the answer is simply: God *IS*. God *was*, before all things; God *is*, above all things; God *will be*, beyond all things. It is simply the verb “to be.” “To be or not to be, that is the question” – except in *God’s* case, it is just simply, *to be*. There is no *question* about it. God just *IS*. God explains to Moses: “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’” “I AM” – that is what God is. In Greek, it is ἐγώ εἰμι – *ego eimi*. “I am.” In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses that phrase “I AM” to describe himself seven times: “I am the Bread of Life” (John 6:35); “I am the Light of the World” (John 8:12); “I am the Door” (John 10:9); “I am the Good Shepherd” (John 10:11, 14); “I am the Resurrection and the Life” (John 11:25); “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life” (John 14:6); “I am the Vine” (John 15:1, 5). Every single one of those titles for Jesus harkens back to this revelation of God’s name to Moses at the burning bush: “I AM.”

Indeed, Jesus doesn’t stop there. In John’s Gospel, there is also a scene in which some Jews ask Jesus if he has seen Abraham. Jesus replies: “Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I AM.” (John 8:58) Jesus identifies himself with the same divine name that God revealed to Moses long ago. Which means, Moses didn’t just meet *God* in that burning bush at the base of Mount Sinai. He met ... *Jesus!*

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