Sermon: Rules For Everyday Life
Scripture: Romans 12:9-21
Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." No, "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." Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.
THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

At a transitional ministry retreat the sixty ministers involved were asks to create a "Covenant" that would govern their behavior toward one another during the week long event. The room erupted in laughter when one minister shouted, "No Drama" as the first suggestion. Other suggestions quickly followed, "Do not talk when others are talking, Respect the retreat leaders. Participate fully in the activities." Soon the page was full, and each member came up front and signed his or her name in agreement. Over the next few days both leaders and participants had occasion to remind the group of what they had signed as a corrective to behaviors outside the covenant's boundaries. These verses in Paul's letter to Christians in Rome would function brilliantly as a group covenant for any gathering of people of faith.
Paul presents his people with twelve concise rules for ordinary, everyday life.

Love must be completely sincere. There must be no hypocrisy, no play-acting, no ulterior motive. There is such a thing as cupboard love, which gives affection with one eye on the gain which may result. There is such a thing as selfish love, whose aim is to get far more than it is to give. Christian love is cleansed of self; it is pure outgoing of the heart to others.
We must hate that which is evil and cling to that which is good. It has been said that our one security against sin lies in our being shocked by it. It has been said that no virtue which is not passionate is safe. No one whose life consists of a prudent avoidance of evil and a calculating adherence to that which is good is safe. We must hate evil and love good. With regard to one thing, we must be clear; what many people hate is not evil but the consequences of evil. No one is really good when that goodness simply comes from fear of the consequences of being bad. Not to fear the consequences of dishonor, but to love honor passionately, is the way to real goodness.

We must be affectionate to one another in mutual love. We must love each other, because we are members of one family. We are not strangers to each other within the Christian Church; we are brothers and sisters, because we have the one father, God.
We must give each other priority in honor. More than half the trouble that arises in churches concerns rights and privileges and prestige. Someone has not been given his or her place; someone has been neglected or unthanked. The mark of the truly Christian man or woman has always been humility. One of the humblest of all people was John Cairns. Someone recollects an incident which showed Cairns as he was. He was a member of a platform party at a great gathering. As he appeared, there was a tremendous burst of applause. Cairns stood back to let the man next to him pass and began to applaud

the man himself; he never dreamt that the applause was for him. It is not easy to give each other priority in honor. There is enough natural instinct in most of us to want others to recognize our rights; but Christians have no rights – they have only duties.

We must not be sluggish in our zeal. There is a certain intensity in the Christian life; there is no room for drowsiness in it. Christians cannot take things in an easygoing way, for the world is always a battle ground between good and evil; the time is short, and life is a preparation for eternity. Christians may burn out, but they must not rust out.

We must keep our Spirit at boiling point. The one whom the risen Christ could not stand was the person who was neither hot nor cold (Revelation 3:15-16). Today, people are apt to look with distrust upon enthusiasm; the modern battle cry is "I could care less." But Christians are people who are desperately in earnest; they are aflame for Christ.

Paul's seventh rule may be one of two things. The ancient manuscripts vary between two readings. Some read: "Serve the Lord" and some read: "Serve the time," that is grasp your opportunities. In a section so filled with practical advice, it is more likely that Paul was saying to his people: "Seize your opportunities as they come." Life presents us with all kinds of opportunities – the opportunity to learn something new or to cut out something wrong, the opportunity to speak a word of encouragement or of warning; the opportunity to help or to comfort. One of the tragedies of life is that we often fail to grasp these opportunities when they come. There are three things which do not come back – the spent arrow, the spoken word and the lost opportunity.

We are to rejoice in hope. When Alexander the Great was setting out upon one of his campaigns, he was distributing all kinds of gifts to his friends. In his generosity, he had given away nearly all his possessions. "Sir", said one of his friends, "you will have nothing left for yourself." "Oh, yes, I have," said Alexander, "I still have my hopes." Christians must be essentially optimist. Just because God is God. Christians are always certain that "the best is yet to be". Just because they know of the grace that is sufficient for all things and the strength that is made perfect in weakness, Christians know that no task is to much for them. There are no hopeless situations in life; there are only men and women who have grown hopeless about them. There can never be any such thing as a hopeless Christian.

We are to meet tribulation with triumphant courage. Someone once said to someone who bore suffering bravely; "Suffering colors all life doesn't it?" "Yes, came the reply, it does, but I propose to choose the color." When Nebuchadnezzar cast Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego into the burning fiery furnace, he was amazed that they came to no harm. He asks if three men had not been cast into the flames. He was told it was so. He said; "But I see four men unbound, walking in the middle of the fire, and they are not hurt; and the fourth has the appearance of a God" (Daniel 3:25). We can meet anything when we meet it with Christ.

We are to preserve in prayer. Is it not the case that there are times in life when we let day add itself to day and week to week, and we never speak to God? When we cease to pray, we rob ourselves of the strength of the Almighty God. We should not be surprised when life collapses if we insist on living it alone.

We are to share with those in need. In a world intent on getting, Christians are intent on giving, because they know that "what we keep we lose, and what we give we have."

Christians are to offer hospitality. Over and over again, the New Testament insist on this duty of the open door. Hebrews 13:2 states, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." And 1Peter 4:9, "Be hospitable to one another without complaining." A home can never be happy when it is selfish. Christianity is the religion of the open hand, the heart and the open door.

Paul offers a series of rules and principles which should guide our relationship with our neighbors. (V. 14-21)
Christians must meet persecution with a prayer for those who persecute them. Long ago, Plato had said that the good man will choose to suffer evil rather than to do evil; and it is always evil to hate. When Christians are hurt, and insulted, and badly treated, they have the example of their Master before them, for he, upon his cross, prayed for forgiveness for those who were killing him.

There has been no greater force to move people into Christianity than this serene forgiveness which the martyrs in every age have shown.
Steven died praying for forgiveness for those who stoned him to death (Acts 7:60). Among those who killed him was a young man named Saul, who afterwards became Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles and the slave of Christ. There can be no doubt that the death scene of Stephen was one of the things that turned Paul to Christ. Many persecutors have become followers of the faith they once sought to destroy, because they have seen how Christians can forgive.
We are to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. There are few bonds like that of a common sorrow. A lady in Charleston met a black servant of a neighbor. I'm sorry to hear of your Aunt Lucy's death, she said. You must miss her greatly. You were such good friends. "Yes" said the servant, I'm sorry she died. But we weren't friends. Why said the lady, I thought you were? I've seen you laughing and talking together lots of times. "Yes". That's so came the reply. We've laughed together, and we've talked together, but we were just acquaintances. You see, Miss Ruth, we never shed any tears. Folks have got to cry together before they are friends.
The bond of tears is the strongest of all. And yet it is much easier to weep with those who weep than it is to rejoice with those who rejoice. It requires more of a high Christian temper to rejoice with them that do rejoice than to weep with them that weep. For this nature itself fulfills perfectly; and there is none so hard-hearted as not to weep over a calamity; but the other requires a very noble soul, so as not only to keep from envying, but even to feel pleasure with the person who is in esteem. It is indeed, more difficult to congratulate others on their success, especially if their success involves disappointment to us, than it is to sympathize with their sorrow and their loss. It is only when self is dead that we can take as much joy in the success of others as in our own.
We are to live in harmony with one another. It is a band of brothers and sisters that any Christian church should be. The mode of church government is unconstrained; but peace and harmony, kindness and good will are indispensable. When strife enters into any Christian society, the hope of doing any good work is gone.

We are to avoid all pride and snobbishness. We always have to remember that the standards by which the world judges' people are not necessarily the standards by which God judges them. Saintliness has nothing to do with rank, or wealth, or birth. Dr. James Black of the United Presbyterian Church in Dundee, described a scene in an early Christian congregation. A notable convert has been made, and the great man comes to his first church service. He enters the room where the service is being held. The Christian leader points to a place. "Will you sit there, please?" But, says the man, "I cannot sit there, for that would be to sit beside my slave." "Will you sit there, please?" repeats the leader. But, says the man, "surely not beside my slave." Will you sit there, please?" Repeats the leader once again. And the man at last crosses the room, sits beside his slave, and gives him the kiss of peace. That is what Christianity did; and that is what it alone could do in the Roman Empire. The Christian Church was the only place where master and slave sat side by side. It is still the place where all earthly distinctions are gone, for with God there is no respect for individual status.
We are to make our conduct fair for all to see. Paul was well aware that Christian conduct must not only be good; it must also look good. So-called Christianity can be presented in the hardest and most unlovely way; but real Christianity is something which is fair for all to see.

We are to live at peace with all. But Paul adds two qualifications. He says: if it is possible. (1) There may come a time when the claims of courtesy have to submit to the claims of principle. Christianity is not an easy-going tolerance which will accept anything and shut its eyes to everything. There may come a time when some battle has to be fought – and when it does, Christians will not shirk it. (2) He says: as far as you can. Paul knew very well that it is easier for some to live at peace than for others. He knew that one person can be compelled to control as much temper in an hour as someone else in a whole lifetime. We would do well to remember that goodness is a great deal easier for some than for others; that will keep us both from criticism and from discouragement.

We are to keep ourselves from all thought of taking revenge. Paul gives three reasons for that. (1) Vengeance belongs not to us but to God. In the last analysis, no human being has a right to judge any other; only God can do that. (2) To treat people with kindness rather than vengeance is the way to move them. Vengeance may break the spirit; but kindness will break people's hearts. "If we are kind to our enemies, says Paul, it will heap coals of fire on their heads." That means not that it will store up further punishment for them but that it will move them to burning shame. (3) To stoop to vengeance is to be ourselves conquered by evil. Evil can never be conquered by evil. If hatred is met with more hatred, it is only increased; but, if it is met with love, an antidote for the poison is found. As the American educationalist, Booker T. Washington said, "I will not allow any man to make me lower myself by hating him." The only real way to destroy an enemy is to make that person a friend.

PRAYER: Eternal God, send your Holy Spirit into our hearts, to direct and rule us according to your will, to comfort us in all our afflictions, to defend us from all error, and to lead us into all truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord AMEN.