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A Manual for Christian Living
The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles
Psalm 26:1-8; Romans 12:9-21

Maybe it has happened to you. You decide to order a piece of furniture that can be delivered right to your doorstep. The only problem is you have to put it together — yourself. So, you unbox it, and you look it over. And you dive into this project. Remember, you have never put together this piece of furniture before. You have not seen a YouTube video on how it is done. You are brand new at this task. But you plunge in, because you know that you are good at such things. You can figure it out. And all goes well — up to a point. When you stand back and look at what you have done — and what is left over. It is then you see that the two do not add up to the end result that is pictured on the box. What do you do? Ah. Why didn't you think of it before? Yes. You look at the instructions.

That is the situation of the believers in Rome to whom Paul wrote. They were good, smart, spirited, enthusiastic, and willing new Christians. The operative word being *new*. They had never done this before. In fact, practically no one had done this before. There were a smattering of similar congregations all around the Mediterranean basin, who were in the same boat they were — all of them novice followers of Jesus Christ. They were making it up as they went along. Sometimes, all of the pieces came together like the picture on the box, while, at other times, they did not. Paul wanted them to have what no one had ever had before: a set of instructions, a “how to” guide. That is why we have this passage from Romans to look at this morning. It is *A Manual for Christian Living*. And it is chock full of helpful information, vital information.

It is no wonder, when we read it, that much of it seems self-evident to us. Because Christians have been following this manual for 2,000 years, give or take a few.

This manual is for you. Although there are many fine elements of it, if you were to boil it down to a watchword for daily living, you would probably select the opening phrases: *“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.”* No Christian can go far wrong, living in this way.

It must have sounded idealistic to people living in Rome, that great capital of the empire, with all of the wonders and problems that such cities possess. Maybe even our city. How do you live with people who have different values than yours? You model a way of living that is true to the Christ whom you follow. So even if others live in ways that are opposed to your own, you will still determine, no matter what others may do: “I will let love be genuine. I will hate what is evil. I will hold fast to what is good. I will love with mutual affection. I will outdo others, in showing honor.”

In the maze of modern living, it may sound like you are climbing a hill as steep as Mount Washington to make it happen. The fact is, you are. But maybe, in doing so, you will touch just one other person in such a way that they decide to do as you are doing, and for the same reasons, because Christ is Lord of your life. So, your foremost goal is to live in ways that honor Christ.

In those ancient days, the highest alternate way of living was to honor the emperor. Now I am not an expert on the Roman Empire, but I do know there were more unsavory emperors than exemplary ones. So let's rule out the unsavory ones and focus on the exemplary ones. What did people do, to honor the emperor? They took the emperor's word as law. They did as the emperor commanded. They did so without hesitation or complaint or question. And they worshipped the emperor.

We think it sounds strange for anyone to worship a human being, and it is. But that is what they did. It formed a life framework for them. They were working out of a completely different manual from the *Manual for Christian Living*. However, we can translate what they did to the Christian ideal, by saying: I take Jesus' word as law. I will do what Jesus commands. I will do so without hesitation or complaint or question. I will worship Christ, and Christ alone. It is a matter of loyalty — on a higher plane than anything that was reserved for the emperor. Not because Jesus needs it, but because you need it. So, as I say, this manual is for you.

This manual is also for our congregation. If you want to know about Shadyside Presbyterian Church, you can go about it in many ways. There are a number of fine histories of the church — several of them by our own dear Tim Engleman — well worth reading, and re-reading from time to time.

If you want to know about Shadyside Presbyterian Church, you can ask longtime members. They can tell you some fascinating stories of what the church was like in the 1950s — and before and since. Their stories are a part of our stories, and we do well to hear them, and make them part of our experience.

If you want to know about Shadyside Presbyterian Church, you can listen to the scuttlebutt in the neighborhood. That tells us how our church is perceived by others. It can be very enlightening. What stands out? What are the features that make this congregation an essential part of Pittsburgh? What may need some attention or adjustment?

And then, if you want to know about Shadyside Presbyterian Church, you can go to the manual. Yes, the one in the twelfth chapter of Romans. As you read it, you recognize this church — your church. You can think of people who fit this description — as if they have read the manual, and, when they put it together, it all fit. There were not spare parts left over. The thing was not put together in a way that is shoddy or askew. It is as God, the maker, intended it to be, along the lines of the Holy Spirit. It is as if there is a black leather cover on this manual, and inscribed on the center, in gold letters, it says:

A Manual for Christian Living
Property of Shadyside Presbyterian Church

Without any doubt, this manual is for our congregation. Back then, Paul was saying something new. Then, as now, what you read is true — a truth that is eternal. *"If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."* Amen.