

Learning to Walk

by Linda Rex

September 3, 2023, Proper 17 | After Pentecost—I remember when my husband and I were farming and had to do chores after a week of heavy rain or snow melt. It was such a pain to simply try to walk across the barnyard. If we weren't careful, the suction of the mud would grab hold of our rubber boots and we would step right out of them, causing us to trip, or worse, land facedown or on our knees in the mud.

There are times when it seems as though we are wading through thick mud in our efforts to live in right relationship with God and one another. We get caught in difficult places and we end up in situations which cause us to suffer or question exactly how to respond. Though our life in Christ is upheld by all Jesus has done for us in his vicarious humanity, is doing now in his mediation with our Father, and is empowered by his Holy Spirit and personal presence, it still requires our full participation, which involves learning new things.

When my children were infants, they had to learn to walk. They didn't immediately figure out how to do this, but had to learn and practice individual skills which enabled them to eventually be able to walk. They would lay on a blanket on the floor, begin to roll one way and then the other. Then they would get onto their tummies, pull their knees under themselves and rock. Eventually they would begin to discover they could crawl to reach those toys or objects they wanted. Then they figured out how to pull themselves up on the couch and stand. Eventually they were able to take a few tentative steps, which eventually led to them walking. Soon they were running about, getting into all kinds of trouble while I tried to keep up with them.

As you can see, we don't magically learn new ways of walking without practice, or our full participation in our learning and growth. This also applies to our walk with Christ. This is why we find in the New Testament lists of descriptions of what it looks like to live out the truth of who we are in Christ. And learning to live out the truth of our new life in Christ takes practice.

One of these lists is Romans 12:9-21, where the apostle Paul follows his discussion of the gifts of the Holy Spirit with instructions on how to express God's love in our everyday lives. We open ourselves up to the Holy Spirit by practicing (notice that it takes practice) spiritual disciplines such as prayer, Bible study, meditation, silence, contemplation, worship, and service. Note that we do *not* do these things to make ourselves better people, to impress others, or to get ourselves right with God. Rather we do these things to make ourselves available to God to grow us up in Christ and to participate in his mission and ministry in this world. The first way is turned inward and is self-reliant and self-exalting; God's way is Christ-centered, open to the Spirit, dependent upon the Father, and turned outward in service and love toward others.

What Paul describes in this passage in Romans are ways in which we allow God's love to flow into us and out to others, even to those who persecute or harm us in some way. Paul tells us that this love is to be authentic and real, not hypocritical. The genuineness of our love is reflected in our abhorrence of evil and devotion to what is good. God's love pours out to our brothers and sisters in Christ in familial affection and honor. By the Spirit, we are passionate about expressing the love of God in Christ, serving God even in difficult and trying situations. Our conversation with God is ongoing through constant prayer, and we are generous and hospitable towards our brothers and sisters in Christ. We participate in the suffering and joy of others as Christ does with us, and we are humble in our estimation of ourselves and our treatment of others.

Living out God's love isn't just for our relationships with those within the body of Christ. Paul explains that God's love should shine out in all our relationships, even with those who are hostile or who harm us. He tells us to do everything within our power to live in peace with everyone, but

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acknowledges that may not always be possible. He tells us to leave vengeance up to God—we are to bless those who are our enemies, overcoming evil with good. These descriptions of our life in Christ resonate with Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and so remind us that it is God's love flowing in and through us that makes this possible—it is Christ's life lived in and through us by his Spirit that enables us to live in this way. It is not something we are necessarily able to do under our own power.

Our participation in Christ involves practicing these Christlike ways of living and serving others. This is not something we do well at first, but we keep practicing, allowing Christ's life to flow in and through us by his Spirit, and drawing upon God's wisdom, strength and power. Over time, we will find that living in genuinely other-centered loving ways has become less like trudging through the mud and falling flat on our face, and more like a celebration of God's life and love.

We are God's children, and will always be learning and growing in this life, by the Spirit developing the characteristics of Christ, and becoming more glorious reflections of our heavenly Father. And since God's kingdom life is how we will be living for all eternity, it only makes sense to start learning to live it out now by learning and practicing our new life in Christ.

Father, thank you for making us your very own, and for teaching us how to live this out day by day. Grant us the grace to remain open to you and allow you to form Christ in us. Heavenly Spirit, please make manifest in us and in our lives the love of God in Christ, so that we grow to look more and more like Jesus. Amen.

“Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. ‘But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:9–21 NASB