

Exodus 3:10-15

(God said to Moses) So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt." But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" He said, "I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain."

But Moses said to God, "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 said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you': This is my name forever, and this my title for all generations.

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.

“A Thick-Skinned People”

I wonder how we are ever supposed to make it through Paul's list without passing out from exhaustion? Paul's many exhortations to us seem like a bad case of over stimulation. Maybe he had too much caffeine. It took me a long time to simply come up with a reading of this text that might even keep your attention till the end. I become dazed and confused reading all the imperatives, infinitives and participles. Who could ever uphold this entire charge? It is hard work to focus our lives on fulfilling just one of its lines. Some of the most difficult tenets of Christian living come up. "Let love be genuine." "Bless those who persecute you." "Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good...do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good."

One commentator on this text noted in regards to loving enemies and blessing our persecutors, "Paul stands firmly with Jesus and the entire early Christian tradition against all other traditions known to us" during Paul's time.¹ These exhortations are counter cultural for a Jew of Paul's day. Paul knew he was called to follow the Prince of Peace, a man who let himself be crucified! So Paul made Jesus' teachings and his obedience to God's will the basis for this passage about Christian living. If they had heard them the rest of the world during Paul's time would have thought these exhortations were insane. No, this is living done in light of the mercy of God as we are continually transformed and molded into living new lives in Jesus Christ.

I don't believe much has changed between what the world thought then and today about Paul's list. More people claim the Christian faith than in Paul's day, but most of us still have trouble accepting Paul's entire list. Paul's imperatives run counter to human inclinations because living in Christ means abiding in God's will and way instead of our own. The list is a way for us to live that shows forth God's love, which is so radically different from our own romantic love, that Paul's list holds the power to continually take us by surprise as we read it and ponder applying it to our lives. Paul's list is a calling. The calling of every Christian, whether we want the call or not.

You have to have pretty thick skin to have the guts to live out this list today! There would be backlash; there always is when someone tries to love their enemy or show hospitality to a total stranger. She's a lightweight, he's a sucker—you've heard the critiques. That man takes too many risks inviting that homeless guy into his house time and time again. Thick skin takes time to grow. It might develop naturally over time, but it seems to grow best with intentional development like our inquiring after God by desiring to know God's history with the world, God's promises, God's nature.

Moses' calling from God out of the burning bush to "bring my people out of Egypt" probably seemed to him as difficult to grasp and live out as the exhortations Paul calls us to in our Romans text. His skin thickened on that hot desert sand, not just because of the long walk! God's revelation, I AM WHO I AM, the God of his Ancestors, built up the layers of Moses' skin to assure him of God's presence with him in facing Pharaoh.

I am always struck by the part where Moses is told God's name forever, God's title for all generations! God's name is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (we would do well to add Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel). To us today this statement is pretty passive. We've heard it all before in the Bible. But to Moses this meant that the God of his ancestors, the God the Hebrew people trusted but thought was gone, was alive! Knowing God's name meant knowing God's promises, renewed hope that God was with them always, forever, for all generations. God was with him and Moses knew God's history, so despite the radical nature of the call Moses went to Egypt.

Knowing God's names, God's history and God's presence with us helps us to discern God's will and follow Paul's exhortations in a world that might not agree with them. It is impossible to follow in the way of God if we barely know God's story with the world! God's names alone are incredible and give us clues to God's presence. Sovereign One, Holy of Holies, El, our Rock, Mother Hen, Creator, Eagle, Messiah, Spirit, Mother nursing, Father who welcomes the prodigal home, Wonderful Counselor, Lord, Wisdom, Woman who found a lost coin, Jesus, Abba, Grace, and God of our Ancestors barely begin the list. The comfort of following a wondrous God in a confusing world comes as our faith and biblical knowledge grow together.

We have to be a pretty thick-skinned people to follow God's call these days. God's people always have had thick skin though. The people Israel found God's comfort and hope in exile, in plenty, in desert wandering and in waiting for God's promise to become

reality. The skin on their feet grew thick as they walked hard roads. They did not walk those roads alone. There was manna in the desert, quail and water, the cloud over the tent in which the holy of holies lay. All were provided out of God's grace. Grace aided the thickening of their skin as they followed God. As we learn the history of God with God's people faith in God becomes comfort instead of seeming like perpetual challenge.

By faith we can trust each other and our God given discerning capacities enough to meet at tables and talk about God together. It takes thick skin to sit at table and learn about God with a group of diverse people! Our tough linings will be thickened to face the day ahead of us as we open our Bibles and learn of God with us. So when that first car cuts us off or our teenagers get their first speeding ticket, we won't forget that our love is supposed to be genuine. Then when the hard work of Christian life hits and we are called upon to bless those who persecute us we will have a foundation of faith and knowledge to stand on when the questions come from those around us. It is not easy to live in this world with an alternate worldview focused on God's reign. A wise commentator said about our calling to follow Jesus, "There will be times when the world will not understand the points at which Christian standards will not permit those who hold them to go along with the ways of the world."² Our alternate point of view is only possible as we allow ourselves to be nourished by grace and challenged by God and one another to live in this world as God's people.

My father in Arizona is part of a group that works for more human borders along the US and Mexico. Once a month he drives a truck down from Tempe to the middle of the desert to refill and clean up one desert site that has water to aid desert travelers, mostly people trying to find a better life in the US. Hundreds and hundreds of people die from dehydration and starvation trying to cross our borders each year. My dad and his group meet lots of different people on their trips into the desert to the sites our government has approved to have the water available at. Many of the locals surprisingly approve of my father's work even though they would like tougher border restrictions and controls. They may want more legislation around border issues, but at the same time, they are not willing to let someone die in the desert. As one woman told my father, "At the same time I want tighter borders, every time an illegal comes to my mobile home door, I open it and feed them. They are usually about to starve and need water. No one is going to starve on my watch. It is now illegal for me to feed people on this land because of new laws, but I don't care! I do it by faith. Nobody's starving because I was scared to give them a meal."

We are given the opportunity to live in the assurances of God, which set us free from our fears through the Spirit and Christ and opens us to following God instead of our human nature. It's a complex world. God has empowered us to make decisions about how we will live in this world based on our faith.

Love, hold fast, show honor, be ardent in spirit, rejoice, serve, suffer, persevere, contribute, extend hospitality, bless persecutors...and on and on. All these must be held in light of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, poured freely upon us. Grace WILL

SUSTAIN US in Christian living. Becoming a thick-skinned people by broadening our knowledge of God and God's word, sure would aid in our growth. A-men.

¹ N.T. Wright, "The Letter to the Romans," *New Interpreter's Bible: a commentary in twelve volumes*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002) 713.

² *ibid*, 714.