

September 9, 2018
Romans 12:9-17
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“Just Do It”

Good morning! You may be aware of an anniversary this year; this is the thirtieth anniversary of the Nike sportswear company’s wildly successful “Just do it” ad campaign. It is making news because Nike is using a controversial spokesperson, NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, as the face of this campaign. You may be relieved to hear that Nike’s ad campaign is not going to be the topic of the sermon this morning, but the tag line Just do it gives me a framework to talk about two significant parts of the Christian life.

The first is theology. Theology means “words about God : theology is what we believe and what we say. The second part of the Christian life is ethics, which is how we act and how we treat other people. Simply put, theology is what we believe and ethics is how we behave. Believing / behaving: got it? Our text today is from Paul’s letter to the Romans -- we’ll be spending some time in Romans in September. Paul was the great theologian of the early church, and one commentator describes the letter to the Romans as “the most sustained theological argument found in any of Paul’s letters.” We’d expect to find a lot in this letter about God and Christ’s relationship to God, and how different groups of people -- for Paul specifically Jews and non-Jews -- fit into God’s plan and salvation in Christ.

A quick scan of the section headings in my study Bible give some clues about the beliefs which Paul is addressing. You probably know that these section titles and the chapter and verses which are in the Bible were not there originally: all that stuff was put in by later editors so that biblical readers had a common reference of how to find things: Romans chapter 12 verse 9 instead of -- you know, about three-quarters of the way through, right after the section on not being conformed to the world. The section titles are someone’s

interpretation, but they can give us clues as to what's going on. Here's some of what's going on in Romans: God's Justifying righteousness, God's promise realized through faith, Dying and rising with Christ, God's love in Christ Jesus and God's wrath and mercy. This is some pretty dense theological stuff. And into the middle of this theological commentary on belief comes chapters 12, 13, and 14, which commentators call the "ethical" section.

In my study Bible, the section which begins in chapter 12 verse 9 is titled "Marks of the True Christian." Let me read the first couple verses again and listen carefully for what this says about God: "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." (9-13) What did you hear about righteousness, truth and salvation?

Beliefs about righteousness, truth, and salvation are at the heart of Christianity. I think that the Apostle Paul would agree with me -- I hope you would, too. The theology of the letter to the Romans is crammed full of that stuff. But it isn't in Romans 12:9-17 -- those verses are all about how we treat each other. So what's the connection? Are the marks of a true Christian what we believe or how we behave? The short answer is Yes. The longer answer is the rest of this sermon.

Paul's letters -- not only Romans, but especially Romans -- lay out theological beliefs: he lays the foundation on which Christian theology is built. But Paul wasn't writing systematic theology, he was writing to letters to counsel real churches in real-life situations -- usually some kind of conflict. And how Christians treat one another, especially when there's some kind of conflict, is what people see -- no matter what we say we believe. Theology and ethics aren't two separate things, they are two parts of being Christian which are intertwined. Efforts to try to compartmentalize them are either funny or sad. There's a Peanuts comic strip where Linus, who is prone to philosophy says, "I love humanity, it's people I can't stand." It's funny when a cartoon character says it, but it's sad when people who claim to be Christians who also claim to hate illegal immigrants,

people on welfare, law enforcement officers, and folks whom they've gone to church with for years.

Paul is no fool: he knows there are bad actors out there, and he does not suggest that whatever anyone does is just fine. There is room for disagreement, and we certainly can't count on other people doing the right thing, but we are still called to behave as Christians: that is, followers and imitators of Jesus Christ. Here's what Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you: bless and do not curse them. 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." I think this is Just Do It ethics: we have to just do the right thing, whatever our circumstances. The right thing is the teaching and the example of Jesus, and this does not depend on how other people treat us. not how other people treat us.

I want to add another word to believing and behaving: that is belonging. What we believe and how we behave as individuals determines the kind of community we will be, and how we will include others. We had the privilege of welcoming a new member today: we did that in sort of scripted way during the service, but we'll have lots of chances to welcome Doris less formally. I encourage you to greet her, strike up conversation, get to know her and give her the opportunity to get to know you. She's pretty easy to talk to. But a new member in our church building may not be the only unfamiliar face you will encounter today: if you come back to Creekside for the Block Party between 2 and 5 this afternoon, you're bound to see people you don't know. Some of you have already donated time and resources to that event: the purpose of our Block Party is partly for us to have a good time, eat some ice cream, show off our corn hole skills, but it's primarily an opportunity to meet adults and children from our neighborhood and increase our visibility in this community. It is one way that we live into Paul's commands in verse 13 to Contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers. We can't always plan for who is going to be present or what the weather will be, but I encourage you to show up and Just do it: extend hospitality to strangers. Greet them, talk to their families, show them where the bathrooms are, be welcoming, model what it means to belong to a family of faith. Creekside would like to be a

neighborhood church for people who haven't found a place where they belong. It's going to take more than the four people on the Hospitality Team to extend a welcome in the name of Christ. Thanks to those who have planned the block Party on our behalf.

Another way which we share belonging with our sisters and brothers is to pray for them and with them. Whoever you are, wherever you come from, whatever you are carrying today that you feel the need for healing, forgiveness or the strengthening of your faith, you are invited to come forward for anointing as we sing the closing hymn. Each person here belongs to God, and we offer anointing with oil as a sign of God's spirit upon anyone who has the humility to ask for it and the openness to receive it. Please come forward if you wish to be anointed, and we will invite members of the congregation to lay hands on you and pray at the end of the service. May Christ strengthen our belief, shape our behavior, and draw us into a sense of belonging. In Jesus' name, Amen.