

# Attitudes in Action

Romans 12:3-16

May 17, 2020



*Please read Romans 12:3-16 before going further in this transcript.*

Back in the day I attended Northwestern College in Roseville, MN. Now of course, it's called the University of Northwestern, St. Paul. While I was there, I met a guy named Barry, who has become one of my very best friends. He and I were ministry majors together. We were roommates for a couple of years. I was a Resident Assistant. Barry was in football among other things. By far, he was the athlete between us. He was a South Dakota farm boy who weighed in at a very muscular, lean mean 200+ pounds. I was a nerd from northern WI who was mostly into academics. I weighed in at a scrawny, not so mean, maybe 170 pounds soaking wet. I'm sharing this with you, to set up a story that I'd like to tell you today. One day, during our Sr. Year, a bunch of us were sitting around a big table in the Northwestern dining hall. This is before the Billy Graham center was built. This is back when meals were served in the lower level, under the Nazareth Chapel. Anyhow, one day for some reason they decided to do have our morning chapel time in the dining area. It was a particularly dry presentation. Most of us around our table were trying to politely listen, but we just weren't feeling it, especially so early in the morning. Well, long story short, Barry started to make remarks about how this particular chapel was such a waste of time. After all, we were big, important college students; we had other better things to do! As he went on and on complaining about it, I'd finally heard enough. I told him that his attitude stunk and that he should just shut up. He just gave me a look, kinda like, "yeah right Johnson, what are you going to do about it!?" I'm not quite sure what came over me, but I launched across the table at him! I literally knocked him out of his chair and onto the floor. At first, he was in total shock; He couldn't believe I'd done this. But then (at least according to his side of the story) "he won." He gained the upper hand and put me on my back! But even then, I just looked up at him and told him, "You need to change your attitude man!" And, eventually... he agreed... that I was right. (And we both agreed that he was stronger.) Now to be fair, more than once, Barry has had to do the same for me. He's had to knock me on my backside, get in my face, and tell me, "Your attitude stinks Johnson!"<sup>1</sup>

Brother or Sister in Christ, how's your attitude today? Maybe your attitude is beginning to stink a little... because of Zoom fatigue, or not being able to travel, or having your favorite event cancelled. Maybe it's because of struggles with work or family/friends or health or any number of other difficult circumstances. Whatever it may be, is your personal attitude beginning to get a little stinky? My prayer today is that God would convict each one of us, to admit any areas where we have an ungodly attitude. That we would repent. My prayer is also that God would encourage each one of us, and help us to embrace a godly attitude so that we can live fully for Him. Romans 12 talks about embracing a godly attitude. Please open your Bible to Romans 12:3. Living for God calls us to embrace godly attitudes. First of all, **Living for God calls us to...**

**1) Embrace an attitude of humble harmony.**<sup>2</sup> Romans 12:3 warns us, "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you." In a word, "thinking of yourself more highly than you ought," is pride. Pridefulness is an incredibly unattractive attitude. God's Word calls us to embrace an honest humility, as we "think of ourselves with sober judgment."<sup>3</sup> As Christ-followers, we need to reject attitudes of pride and arrogance.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Barry and I both fondly reflect back on this time as "the good old days." According to his side of the story, he ended up "winning." When I asked him if he remembered what it was about, he texted "testosterone." Apparently NWC had moved chapel to the dining area for some reason. Barry felt that this particular chapel was a waste of time. He was complaining about it right as I launched across the table at him. There was an older lady on the faculty who was "rather anxious about the commotion."

<sup>2</sup> Consider also Romans 11:18-21 and 14:1-4.

<sup>3</sup> By the way, this means not to think of ourselves too highly OR too lowly. This is NOT a call to false modesty.

<sup>4</sup> Scripture warns us over and over again how God feels about those who are proud. For example, see 2 Samuel 22:28; Psalm 18:27 and 101:5; Proverbs 16:18, 18:12, and 21:4; and Isaiah 13:11.

I can still remember how God humbled me back in 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I had recently cleared 11' in pole vaulting, and I was SO happy about it! My coach called the local press to come out and snap a picture of me at practice one day. After multiple failed attempts, the photographer finally left. The caption under my picture in the next day's newspaper read: "Johnson MISSES his attempt at 11'." It dealt a crushing blow to my ego. BUT, it was oh SO good for my spiritual maturity.<sup>5</sup> Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought!<sup>6</sup>

This idea of a prideful attitude comes up again in Romans 12:16, "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."<sup>7</sup> This is a call to humble harmony. In other words, sometimes our pride causes us to think that we are better than others. This can lead to some really unfortunate disharmony among believers. A writer named Brett McCracken wrote a great article this week on the Gospel Coalition website. It's titled, "Church, Don't Let Coronavirus Divide You." Here's a quote from him regarding our need for humility as we consider how to deal with COVID-19: "Have you noticed how remarkably confident so many of us are in our views right now? ... No one of us should assume we've arrived at the definitive answer on how to do this well. Let's model humility by acknowledging that everything is not obvious, and we are all just trying to do the best we can..."<sup>8</sup>

When we act like we have things all figured out, it can be a sign of a dangerous, prideful attitude. Pride can lead us to boldly posture ourselves and spout off our own personal opinions, without even considering our need for humility and harmony. In today's world, this prideful attitude comes out not only while we're in person but even more so when we're online. Sometimes the more we post, the more we begin to actually believe our own fabricated narrative. Our pride can lead us to imagine ourselves as much wiser and more spiritually mature than we really are.<sup>9</sup> But God's Word warns us not to be conceited and not to be proud, but rather to live in humble harmony with each other.

The fact is, there is a lot of intense debate going on right now over what actions we should take, and not take, in response to COVID-19. But Romans 12 calls us to reflect on the ATTITUDES of our heart. So, regardless of what ACTIONS we take in response to this virus, let's make sure to check our ATTITUDES first. Is our attitude pleasing to God? Is our attitude helping us stay unified in Christ? Insisting that our opinion on this COVID-19 matter is right and best, may cause more damage than we could ever realize. When it's all done and said, maintaining a godly attitude throughout this global pandemic, will be far more valuable than who was "right or wrong." So let's embrace this attitude of humble harmony. Living for God also calls us to...

**2) Embrace an attitude of honoring others above ourselves.** Romans 12:10 urges us to "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves." Living for God requires us to respect each other and to treat each other with mutual esteem. No matter how important we might think we are, we are no more important than anyone else. No matter how smart we are, or how rich we are, or how well-connected we are. One of my relatives used to say, "It's nice to be important... but it's more important to be nice."<sup>10</sup> Godly living calls us to treat one another with high regard. For Christ-followers, this becomes HUGELY important, as we begin to realize that each and every one of us is a vital part of the body of Christ. Romans 12:4-5 says, "For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." (By the way, this verse isn't talking about church membership. "Members" here simply refers to a part of the body.)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Consider also Jeremiah 48, especially verses 29-31. See Ezekiel 16:49-50; Zephaniah 3:11; and Proverbs 3:34.

<sup>6</sup> See James 4:6. We can either humble ourselves before God and receive His grace or we can wait for Him to humble us.

<sup>7</sup> That last word there, "conceited," is simply another word for arrogant. It's about our own sense of self-importance, vanity, and pride.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/church-dont-let-coronavirus-divide/>

<sup>9</sup> Consider Galatians 6:3-4. See Alan F. Johnson's great comments on p. 103, *Romans Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter, Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985.

<sup>10</sup> My biological dad, David Sodke, used to say this. Christian musician, Steve Taylor, wrote a sarcastic song that calls out arrogant Christians. It's called "Smug." See the lyrics at <https://genius.com/Steve-taylor-smug-lyrics> or listen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HkQF08gqw1o>

<sup>11</sup> μέλος = "a part of the human body, member, part, limb literally, of parts of the human body." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 628). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

Being part of the body of Christ involves a deep intimacy. That's why this time of social distancing is so hard for us; we're used to being together. By design, we're supposed to be together! It's why verse 10 urges us to be devoted to one another in love. It's why verse 13 doesn't hesitate to tell us that we need to "Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality." It's why verse 15 can say, "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."<sup>12</sup> These aren't just nice things to do, these are actions that overflow from an attitude of honoring one another above ourselves.

Our District Superintendent for the Efree churches in MN is named Brian Farone. He recently wrote an article giving practical guidance to churches during this time of COVID-19. Here's what he wrote just this past Thursday: "We find ourselves surrounded by significant tensions and competing priorities. During these times faithful Christian leaders may come to different conclusions and move forward in different ways. As in all things, please extend grace to your brothers and sisters, who share your love for the gospel and biblical convictions, yet see the path forward in a way that differs from you.... we would encourage you to pursue unity (Ephesians 4), cultivate personal humility (Philippians 2), and model a willingness to set aside your individual rights for the sake of the Gospel (1 Corinthians 9)."<sup>13</sup> That's great advice: pursue unity, cultivate personal humility, and model a willingness to set aside our individual rights for the sake of the Gospel. These are the kinds of godly attitudes that will help us to honor others above ourselves. Living for God also calls us to...

**3) Embrace an attitude that leads to spiritually fervent service.** Personally, I think that one of the greatest challenges to being "a fully devoted follower of Jesus," is found in Romans 12:11, "Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord."<sup>14</sup> It's easy to have spiritual fervor right after attending a weekend retreat or a big Christian conference. Or after coming back from a missions trip overseas. But, day in and day out, in the more ordinary and mundane times, it can be awfully challenging to keep our spiritual fire. Just because we are committed to embracing humble harmony and to honoring others above ourselves, that does NOT mean that we are just supposed to sit quietly with our hands folded on our lap. This verse challenges us way beyond mere obedience or meager service to God. It challenges us to an attitude that fuels energetic mission. Verse 11 calls us to TWO THINGS: **Zeal**<sup>15</sup> = "to be eager to do something, with the implication of readiness to expend energy and effort." The (ESV translates v. 11, "Do not be slothful in zeal." The NASB translates it "not lagging behind in diligence." **Spiritual Fervor**<sup>16</sup> = "to be stirred up emotionally, be enthusiastic, excited, on fire." Another translation suggests, "Be set on fire by the [Holy] Spirit."<sup>17</sup>

During this time of COVID-19, are you finding it difficult to stay spiritually pumped up and excited about your faith in Jesus? Life circumstances can cause us to have some really bad, ungodly attitudes. Maybe it's the "Stay at Home" recommendations, maybe it's the loss of your graduation celebrations, maybe it's changes at work or money problems. Maybe it's something else. There are plenty of things in life, over which we have absolutely NO control. But with God's help, every one of us can learn to control our own personal attitude. Chuck Swindoll says this about Attitude: "The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude to me... is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness, or skill. It will make or break a company ... a church ... a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can

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<sup>12</sup> "The early church Father, Chrysostom, poignantly observed how much easier it is to weep with others than to rejoice with them." Alan F. Johnson, *Romans Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter, Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, p. 102.

<sup>13</sup> From a May 14, 2020 email with the subject line: Coronavirus: Updated Guidance for NCD Churches."

<sup>14</sup> Think about the training and skills but also combined with the fervor of Apollos in Acts 18:24-28.

<sup>15</sup> σπουδή = "to be eager to do something, with the implication of readiness to expend energy and effort—to be eager, eagerness, devotion." (Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition., Vol. 1, p. 297). New York: United Bible Societies.)

<sup>16</sup> ζέω = "literally 'boil, seethe'... figurative of emotions, anger, love, eagerness to do good or evil, to be stirred up emotionally, be enthusiastic/excited/on fire." (Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 426). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.)

<sup>17</sup> *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015, p. 2315 footnote on Romans 12:11.

do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude... I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you ... we are in charge of our attitudes.”<sup>18</sup>

Here’s what’s so challenging about this call to an attitude of zeal and spiritual fervor: Paul says NEVER be lacking in it; KEEP it up! This doesn’t mean we have to drum up some kind of false hype. But it does mean that there should be a little bounce in our step. It means that people should not only see us being busy with God’s work, but they should take note that we are pretty happy about it, pretty eager to do it, pretty energized by it. Therefore, if we are lacking in zeal and fervor, we should examine our hearts and ask ourselves “WHY?” Has our love for God diminished? Has His Great Commission fizzled out in us.<sup>19</sup> Have we become distracted or pulled away by lesser things?

Brother or Sister in Christ, are you due for an attitude check? I’m not going to jump across the table and tackle you this morning! But IF YOUR ATTITUDE STINKS, it’s going to totally ruin an otherwise good day. You’re going to squander an otherwise great opportunity for spiritual growth and maturity. It will impact your reputation as an otherwise godly person. On the other hand, A GODLY ATTITUDE, can make even the worst day, a whole lot better.<sup>20</sup> It can help you transform an otherwise terrible situation into something amazing. It can point people to God as other people wonder what makes you so different. **Brother or Sister in Christ, by the power of God’s Spirit, let’s take charge of our attitudes. May God be glorified in our attitudes, as we live for Him!**

This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
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<sup>18</sup> Here is another great illustration of the importance of having a godly attitude. I can’t remember where I found this one:

“John is the kind of guy [...who is] always in a good mood and always has something positive to say. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, “If I were any better, I would be twins!” He was a natural motivator. If an employee was having a bad day, John was there telling the employee how to look on the positive side of the situation. Seeing this style really made me curious, so one day I went up and asked him, “I don’t get it! You can’t be a positive person all of the time. How do you do it?” He replied, “Each morning I wake up and say to myself, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or ... you can choose to be in a bad mood. I choose to be in a good mood.” Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or...I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone comes to me complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or... I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life. “Yeah, right, it’s not that easy,” I protested. “Yes, it is,” he said. “Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It’s your choice how you live your life.” ...[A while after this] I left... to start my own business. We lost touch, but I often thought about him when I made a choice about life instead of reacting to it. Several years later, I heard that [John] was involved in a serious accident, falling some 60 feet from a communications tower. After 18 hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, he was released from the hospital with rods placed in his back. I saw him about six months after the accident. When I asked him how he was, he replied, “If I were any better, I’d be twins...Wanna see my scars?” I declined to see his wounds, but I did ask him what had gone through his mind as the accident took place. “The first thing that went through my mind was the well-being of my soon-to-be born daughter,” he replied. “Then, as I lay on the ground, I remembered that I had two choices: I could choose to live or...I could choose to die. I chose to live.” “Weren’t you scared? Did you lose consciousness?” I asked. He continued, “...the paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. But when they wheeled me into the ER and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, I got really scared. In their eyes, I read ‘he’s a dead man’. I knew I needed to take action.” “What did you do?” I asked. “Well, there was a big burly nurse shouting questions at me,” said John. “She asked if I was allergic to anything ‘Yes, I replied.’ The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, ‘Gravity.’” Over their laughter, I told them, “I am choosing to live. Operate on me as if I am alive, not dead.” He lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, but also because of his amazing attitude... I learned from him that every day we have the choice to live fully. Attitude, after all, is everything.”

<sup>19</sup> Consider Revelation 2:4, “Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first.”

<sup>20</sup> An attitude that’s joyful, patient, and faithful (Romans 12:12).