Words to Live By
A Sermon on Romans 12 by the Rev. Philip Major
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What are the words you live by? Words create worlds. The words and phrases we hear and say to ourselves over and over again shape our hearts and our minds. Especially today, we live in a world full of words and catchy phrases. We live in a world with many choices. We get to choose the words we live by, so we should choose carefully. What are the words you choose to place in the center of your life?

In the United States we have had the benefit of generations of wise political leaders. Abraham Lincoln is considered one of the greatest of our leaders. 150 years President Lincoln said these words in his annual address to congress: The occasion is piled high with difficulty and we must rise with the occasion. Those words still inspire goodness and strength in us 150 years later.

But not all strength is good strength. 50 years ago another man who wanted to be president of our nation called people to strong action with this phrase, Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. I remember the first time I heard a recording of Barry Goldwater say these words: Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. It was 1994. I remember I found this phrase to be interesting. I wondered whether or not Mr. Goldwater was correct. His idea is that liberty is so important that at times it is a good thing to take extreme actions in order to protect liberty.

I wondered about Mr. Goldwater’s words. Just about a year later two men detonated a bomb in front of the Alfred Murrah federal building Oklahoma City, killing 168 people. Then I began to wonder whether the people who made the bomb and killed all of those people might have been carrying Mr. Goldwater’s words around with them in their hearts.

Choose your words carefully. Words create worlds. What are the words you choose to live by? What is the world you are creating with the words you are bringing into your life?

Consider and compare the potential impact of words that respond to social or racial conflict in America. 90 years ago one group responded to the social conflict of the time with the words: Keep America American. That sounds sort of reasonable, sort of patriotic, but what meanings were underneath those words?

The people who first used the phrase ‘Keep America American’ were attempting to divide people into two groups: people who are American and people who are not. It might help to understand the meaning of the phrase if I tell you that it was the slogan of the Ku Klux Klan. The assumption behind the words was that Jews, Catholics and people of African descent should never be considered to be American.

One year ago Michelle Obama responded to the social conflict of our time with these words: When they go low, we go high. Consider the impact of these words on Sasha and Malia and millions of other Americans. We need to choose our words carefully. Michelle Obama understood this very well when she repeated her statement, When they go low, we go high. The words we repeat over and over to ourselves shape our lives and they shape our behavior.

At times I have not been nearly as wise as Michelle Obama in choosing the words that I held in the center of my life. I am not a great fan of Frank Sinatra. Nevertheless, I would swear that for 5 or 10 years the words I held in the center of my life were: “I did it my way!” I was
fiercely independent, to a fault. Eventually it became clear to me that ‘I did it my way’ was not
going to be the best way to live my life. I benefitted from having some better words to choose,
words like the words in Paul’s letter to the Romans.

We have read much of Paul’s letter to the Romans in the past three months. The
arguments and conversation between Paul and the Romans has been confusing at times. Here,
as we get close to the end of the letter Paul wants to be especially clear. In the first half of
chapter 12 Paul encourages the congregation to be united, to care for and support one another as
diverse members of a single body, which he calls the body of Christ.

Our passage for today is just as powerful. These verses continue to lay out the
fundamentals followers of Christ should place in the center of their lives: *Let love be genuine; hate
what is evil, love one another with mutual affection.* Paul returns to the themes that seems
to be constantly present for the Romans: competition and honor. Paul says, ‘Be competitive.
Outdo one another.’ *Outdo one another in giving honor to each other.*

Then Paul turns to one of the most difficult questions for the Romans and for us: “How
will we deal with the world outside the church? How will we deal with those who are
persecuting us?” The followers of Christ in Rome were probably not the victims of organized,
physical persecution. Concerted effort by the Roman government to persecute Christians would
not begin for another hundred years.

The challenges the Romans are facing are much like the ones we face today. The world is
a pretty hostile place. Considering some have described America as a ‘Christian nation’ it is
notable that in America we are more likely to witness the love of power than the power of love.
The situation was the same for the Romans.

Paul says, *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.*

These are words to live by. There are a lot of people in the world trying to do good
things, and there are plenty of people doing plenty of evil things. These are the words I would
try to put in the center of my life: *Do not repay anyone evil for evil.*

Will we encounter people doing evil things out there in the world? You bet! But do not
bring more evil into the world. There is already plenty. Do not bring more evil into your life.
That is what we do when we repay evil with more evil; we end up bringing more evil into our
lives.

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* Don’t let those poisonous
words and actions become part of your life. Instead, *hold fast to what is good.* These are words
to live by.