

Letters From Paul - Session Three

Dear Romans: True Righteousness Comes through Transformation

Romans 12:1-21

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶ We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸ the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ 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." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Background for Romans

The letter to Romans is unique in its structure and language. Paul wrote this letter to all of the Christians in Rome, both the Christian Gentiles and the Christian Jews. When this letter is read in its entirety, we see a combination of ancient Jewish scripture study and Greco-Roman reasoning to develop his theological argument. This allows Paul to speak confidently to both groups in one, unified document. Much of Paul's teaching in this letter starts at the baseline of either Old Testament scripture or the teachings of Jesus and builds a theological and practical defense of the Christian faith appropriate for his combined audience.

The first part of Romans, what we have named chapters 1-8, discuss Paul's theology of the Gospel. It answers questions concerning God's righteousness, why Jesus was the Messiah, and what it means to die with Christ. Chapters 9-11 applies the view of God's righteousness to the election of the Israelites, dispelling any claims that God has turned God's back on the Jews. This leads us into Chapters 12-15, which address what it means to live a life of righteous faith and the difference between the weak and strong in faith. Romans 16 is the conclusion of the letter, with personal greetings and prayers for certain people, as well as the sign off of the letter.

While reading the book of Romans, you can see that Paul is still speaking against the "false teachings" discussed in last week's lesson. Although not spelled out in as much detail as in Colossians and other letters, we see throughout Romans that Paul addresses religion vs. grace, Gnosticism, and the place for ancient scripture in a Christian's everyday modern life. While modern then is not the same of modern now, the living Scripture and the movement of the Holy Spirit allows for growth at every stage of human life and societies development. Today we will focus on Romans 12, which begins to spell out what it means to live a life of righteous faith.

No Half-New Life

Romans 12:1-2 jumps right into addressing the issues of Gnosticism and Jewish Religiosity. “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice” is like a 1-2 punch to the biggest oppositions to the Gospel in that day. Punch #1, your bodies are part of you and part of what you present to God. God wants your whole self, as both Jesus and Deuteronomy say, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.” This could knock the wind out of the Gnostics who believed that only your soul matters and that our bodies have no place in eternity. Paul is backing the traditional Jewish thought that our “bodies” were all inclusive. There was no soul or mind apart from the body. After all God our Creator did put the breath in our lungs, the breath of the Holy Spirit is always in us and around us! But, before the Jewish Christians could get too comfortable, here comes Punch #2.

This is our living sacrifice. This is our spiritual act of worship. The sacrifices and rites and rituals of the past do not hold in a world where Christ has come and made a new covenant. The covenant of grace, being covered by the love of God, is what brings us holiness. Righteousness does not come from marking the right boxes, but from the transformation and new life that comes with Christ.

Paul was telling the Romans that to live an authentic life of faith, we must be just that, authentic. In order to be transformed, they needed to bring every part of themselves – good, bad, holy, sinful – to God. It would be easy to fall back into old patterns of religious rules and expectations or be led astray by the new false teachings. However, to live out a faith that aligns with the will of God they must allow the Spirit of Christ to renew every part of them. Holding back one part of themselves or hiding part of themselves from God would not fulfill this transformation. God can't transform something that we refuse to surrender. That means we are walking around without full transformation, and we know that God is not in the business of partial resurrection or half-new life! We must give our whole selves to God.

Gifts of Grace

As the passage continues with verses 3-8, we see that allowing God to transform every part of a person brings about a deeper calling of faith and service. God unites the body together, no matter what differences we might see, and gives each part of the body a unique gift and way to benefit the body. The church in that time had many divisions, even as young as it was, but that didn't mean that the Grace of God couldn't bridge the gaps! Paul encourages the people in Rome that despite their different backgrounds and the teachings of the day, the transformation that comes with Christ calls each person into unified service to benefit the church.

These gifts are gifts of grace, not our own making, and therefore should be used for the pure purpose of seeing that gift come to life. As people, we can often make serving and living like Christ much more complicated than it needs to be. Here we see Paul making it as simple as possible – whatever your gift is, just do it! If you are a minister, minister! If you are a teacher, teach! If you are an exhorter and encourager, exhort and encourage! If you are a giver, just give! If you are leader, don't give up, keep leading!

Being transformed by the Gospel means we can find our grace-given gifts and simply and purely use them! When God calls us to do something, don't make it too complicated, just do it. Be authentic and pure in the use of your gifts, without looking for praise. These aren't our gifts to praise. They are God's gifts for us to steward and turn the praise back to the One who gave them to us.

Focus on the Good

The last section of this passage spells out very practical ways of living out our faith. How can we present ourselves as a living sacrifice? How can we do what is good and acceptable and perfect? How can we use our gifts to uplift the body? Paul says that the first thing we should do is lead with genuine love, and then everything else follows.

Genuine love is not just a fuzzy feeling. Genuine love takes work and focus. Love requires honesty, earnestness (or zeal), perseverance, accountability, honor, respect, and hope and all the things this passage lists. Love is not love if we give into the evil of the world or the evil in ourselves. And when we do give into that temptation, which we all will because we are all human, it's important to be honest and forgiving of ourselves and others. Once we let God transform us with the love of Christ, we start leading with love and grace, hospitality, patience, prayer, empathy, peace, nobility, and everything else follows.

The world the Roman Christians lived in was quick to tear them down, just as our world is quick to tear us down. Just because we've progressed 2,000 years, doesn't mean the human condition has changed. We are still quick to judge, put down, and shut out those who don't agree with us. We still fall into temptation and self-righteousness and pride. We still like to take matters into our own hands instead of trusting God's work. We can still easily become overcome by evil, but we have the choice to overcome evil with good. In closing, here are some takeaways from today's lesson that can help us overcome evil with good:

Takeaway:

1. In the midst of bad theology and self-righteous religion, the Gospel Truth has the winning place. Paul knew the struggles of the Roman Christians, and rightly believed the Gospel answered their questions just as the Gospel answers our questions.
2. In order to live an authentic life of faith, we have to let God transform every part of us – especially the deepest darkest parts.
3. God has given you gifts. Use them! Your work is never done in the Kingdom of God!
4. This world and our sin will try to tear us down but focusing on God's goodness and living in love will always win. True righteousness comes from living out the grace and love God has given us.

Paul challenges the Christians in Rome, and us, to lift each other up instead of tearing each other down. We are challenged to be authentic, honest, and true. These characteristics are evidence of our transformation. Choosing love over hate and goodness over evil is how people see the grace of God lived out in our lives. To live a life of righteous faith, we don't have to follow all the rules or practice all the ceremony perfectly. To live a life of righteous faith we simply need to allow the light of Christ to shine through as we use our gifts to love and uplift those around us. Just as Jesus allowed his love for the world to transform the world. Instead of condemning the world and putting up a fight, Jesus loved the world enough to save it. Following the example of Christ is what it means to overcome evil with good.

This week I hope you find the strength, "To rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep," to "love one another with mutual affection; [and to] outdo one another in showing honor."

Amen.

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