

The Gospel: Our Relationships in the Church

Romans 12:1-21

Well, finally, we get to the practical parts of Romans that will be more relevant to my life. Particularly, let's get out of those difficult and dangerous portions in Romans 9-11. So here we are. Is this our approach? Is this how we think? Are we not in danger then of turning the gospel into mere relational ethics?

The gospel has two sides: you must bow to Christ and you must obey Christ – both by faith. You must learn the gospel (Ch.1-11) and you must live the gospel (Ch.12-16). It is a single coin with two sides – to reject either side is to lose the whole. We do not get on from the gospel to something else, we move on into and under and with gospel as to how it calls from an initial believe and bow to an ongoing believe and obey. This is why Romans 12:1 opens with *therefore*.

Warren Wiersbe points out that this is the fourth of the great *therefore's* in Romans: Romans 3:20 is the *therefore* of condemnation; Romans 5:1 is the *therefore* of justification; Romans 8:1 is the *therefore* of assurance; here in Romans 12:1 we have the *therefore* of dedication. (Wiersbe, *BEC*, p.554.)

So, while there is a lot of along the valley floor rocks and grass here, I want you to see three major mountains that dominate the landscape in this text.

Its Godward Essentials

(v.1-2)

There are two foundational responses to the gospel that shape and sustain our living of the gospel. I am convinced that:

- If you are unwilling to make these essential responses you have not understood the gospel, God's mercy and grace.
- You must make these essential commitments to make progress in what follows;
- You must not go around Romans 12:1-2 to get to the rest of the book and you must not sever Romans 12:1-1 from Romans 1-11.

What is needed to begin living the gospel?

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

A Sacrificial Presentation of our Bodies

(v.1)

Paul couches this in terms of an appeal or an exhortation. What he calls for should weigh heavy on us because where he grounds it. Because of or through God's multiplied mercies to us, we ought to respond by presenting our bodies to God. This is a decisive act – there is an initial dedication of ourselves at our salvation that is constantly renewed in holiness

and God-pleasing sacrifices day by day. Having presented yourself to God, be standing before God as a living sacrifice.

This is not talking about a dedication or rededication of ourselves after our salvation. That is simply another form of a second grace theology. Loved ones, when you believed and bowed, you decisively presented yourself to God. Since, in His mercies God has saved you, then keep on standing before God (presenting yourself to God) as holy and approved for Him to use as He pleases. Where do I get this? Because the verb here is an *aorist, active infinitive*. In other words, continue (active infinitive) the fact of the past (aorist). Even if you do hold to a post conversion dedication, *the effect is still the same*. What I have to say from here on out through this text impacts on your responsibilities before God in the same way.

That we are to present ourselves, our bodies as living sacrifices gathers up the Old Testament story of Isaac and the death and resurrection of Jesus as its root themes. At the end of the day, what is being called for here is for us to be willing to live as a sacrifice – to die to our own agenda and live to serve God and His kingdom. Further, this living sacrifice is to holy and acceptable to God – it is to meet His standards and requirements.

We are to do this because this is how true rational or spiritual worship and service of God is defined. Worship is not just a Sunday event, it is the moment by moment stream of believing God in an obeying way – living obediently by grace.

A Transforming Renewal of our Minds

(v.2)

Understand this: the gospel comes to us as an agent of change. It requires that we turn from self to our Savior, from worshipping and serving and being mastered by our idols to worshipping, serving and being mastered by God. The gospel is about how Christ through His death, resurrection and Spirit changes us from self-absorbed sinners to God-besotted saints; that is, how the gospel conforms us to Christ. So there must be an obedience of faith in the gospel that is grounded in a commitment to change.

While it is easy to treat verses 1 and 2 as though they are parallel, verse 2 serves to expand on the “holy and acceptable to God” qualification of the living sacrifice. The body is presented worthily to God because the inward man has been radically transformed by a renewed mind and an exercised discernment. So, we do not have step 1 and step 2. We have the whole (v.1) of which (v.2) is the core.

Now let’s look at this a bit more closely.

The imperative here is a single command stated through two words: not conformed but transformed. We are not to be shaped by the world’s mold – its vision or values. This means that we must not conform to the idols of our own past – the world of our flesh and pre-salvation life. We must be undergoing a radical *metamorphosis* – a radical change into what God has designed and destined us for in Christ. There is a pattern of this age that seeks to master us and shape us. And there is the pattern of Christ whom we serve and by whom we are shaped.

This radical transformation is first, an inward one. It has to do with rebuilding and renewing our minds. Paul elsewhere talks of bringing every thought captive to obedience of Christ. This inward mind renewal has two major aspects:

The replacement of error with truth – the identifying of where we believe lies, myths and philosophies and replacing them with truth, doctrine and a Person, the Lord Jesus. This is our formal, “I believe in an obeying way” life statements.

The renewal of our inner conversations – our “self-talk”. There is a constant inner stream of words by which we anticipate, experience and interpret life. This self-talk is either pleasing or displeasing to God – self-oriented or God-others oriented. It includes fantasies, inner debate, moral weighing, warnings from conscience. It is often unobserved and rarely closely analyzed. It is how what we believe informs our wills and shapes affections. It interacts with our wants and desires, either reinforcing them or reacting against them.

What is being called for here is a radical change in our thinking – its content and stream that leads to a radical change in our behavior.

The renewal of mind that transforms us both views and also values God’s will. It *discerns* God’s will and *delights* in God’s will and *does* God’s will. We are not here talking about subjective leading in decision-making. We are talking about wisdom – knowing God’s Word, bringing to bear on our situation to illuminate it, interpret it and indicate the path of righteousness in it.

Now it is imperative for me to say this: you must know only view, discern or know what God’s will is, you must also value, delight or want God’s will. Many, many people clearly know what God’s Word says about life situations, but do not want or prize God’s will. Remember, our choices and emotions flow out of what we think and what we want. So to *discern* God’s will means that we *delight* in God’s will as good, acceptable and perfect.

Its Ministry Focus

(v.3-8)

Now I have spent a lot of time with you on this first point because it is foundational. Let’s begin to follow Paul’s thinking as he shows us how our renewing of our minds begins with “thinking soberly about our gifts” (Stott, p.325). Carson says, “Paul’s purpose in this paragraph is to foster unity among Christians by encouraging an attitude of humility and respect towards one another, particularly in the possession and use of spiritual gifts.” (Carson, *NBC*, LLS)

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he 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 the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; ⁷ if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Honest Evaluation of Ourselves

(v.3)

The way of ministry is modeled for us. Paul speaks to us enabled by grace. Here is word ministry, counsel that comes through God's grace. Though some commentators see this as referring to his apostleship, it seems to me that Paul is demonstrating for us how we ought to do ministry.

In this reminder to us, he points out one of the great dangers facing us. We are very vulnerable to pride and its self-inflating affect on us. We tend think of ourselves as more important, more significant and more critical to life and ministry than we actually are. This arises from hearts that want to be served, honored and affirmed rather than hearts leaning towards grace enabled sacrificial love. The consequence of this danger is that we do ministry by the power of the flesh and human technique rather than by God's power.

What is called for is a serious self-examination that really aims to have an accurate self-assessment. That self-examination is in the light of the standard of faith – the content and control of what we believe. While some would say that this is faith as it is measured out to us, it seems to be more fitting in the light of self-examination to be the standard of measure that God has assigned – the ruler by which we measure ourselves. The point here is to keep us faith oriented rather than law oriented.

Clear Understanding of Body Life

(v.4-5)

The analogy of the body is used to give us a clear understanding of body life – of giftedness in the church community. This analogy is the familiar way Paul thinks of ministry and giftedness. He uses it over and over again. If we are going to have an accurate assessment of our gifts and abilities, we must understand the plurality, diversity and yet essential oneness of our ministering together.

Just as I have arms and eyes and tongue, each part having its own function and yet each part connected to and sustained by the body as a whole, so we are each uniquely shaped and enabled by God to function in the body. Every one of you who are believers have some function, role and responsibility to fulfill. Yet this function is not independent of nor severed from Christ and the local body. We have this Spirit enabling by virtue of our union with Christ.

Powerful Commitment to Grace Ministry

(v.6-8)

Paul goes on then with an *illustrative* list of some of the graces of the Spirit. We have gifts chosen by God and distributed to us by the Spirit. *You do not get to choose your gift*, you are responsible to exercise your gift. You should not desire another's gifts and you should not denigrate your own. I love the way Paul writes this, "Having been given what you have, use it."

The list here is not exhaustive – in fact, I do not believe there is an exhaustive list in the New Testament. This makes designing a spiritual gifts test somewhat difficult. A true spiritual gifts test is this: what can you do? What would you like to do? Will you do until the Spirit's enabling of you is confirmed by others?

Let's briefly consider these gifts. Paul begins with *prophecy*. This is the ability receive the Word directly from God and to speak it either in preaching or predicting. Though Spirit

enabled, powerful, pointed, persuasive preaching of the Scriptures may be considered a gift of prophesy (and many Puritans believed that, as I do) the office of Prophet and the reception of a Word directly from God has ceased with the closing of the giving of Scripture. We reject the notion taught by many of two levels of prophecy – one divinely authoritative that gave Scriptures and the other to be tested and accepted or rejected as such. We teach that the Old and New Testament prophets are the same office fulfilled in Christ. The Apostles are unique in the New Testament. The New Testament is built on the foundation of Christ, laid by the Apostles and prophets who gave the Scriptures.

If a gift of prophecy continues today, it is limited to the authoritative preaching of God's Word *from the Bible*. There is no special, direct channel to God and no special revelation about the future. Any preaching today must measure up to the standard of the faith – the body of truth in the Scriptures.

One of the things that stands out about most of these is that *what they are* is almost never explained. It is assumed that you will know these when you have them or are being ministered to by them. He shows us that these gifts come from God, are given to serve others and reflect the distinctions and unity we have since we are in Christ. Paul is not so concerned here to explain in detail what serving, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading (governing), or acts of mercy *are*, but how thinking accurately about ourselves shapes the *doing* of these gifts. The point here is in *how we do*.

So, if you serve, teach or exhort, do so in the sphere of the gift with opportunities you have according to the faith. If you give, do so generously. If you govern or lead or administrate, do so with passionate diligence. If you do acts of mercy, be joyful and cheerful in it. So Spirit enabled ministry should not be disconnected from Scripture, undisciplined or unstructured, nor stingy or minimalist, nor casual or lazy, nor grudging or joyless. Though ministry may be hard, it should never be exercised as though it were a hardship.

Its Authentic Love

(v.9-13)

Sacrificial offering of our bodies and a transforming renewal of our thinking will be most tested in the persistence of our love. Dying to self, renewing our thinking for purity in living sets the rails on which an authentic love for others may run.

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Framed within a Community Context

This paragraph highlights the characteristics of a love for those within the community of faith. Our love for our brothers and sisters does not exclude that which characterizes our love for those outside – certainly we are to be lovingly engaged with one another as verses 14-21 describe. But these characteristics are those most drawn out as we interact with our fellow believers in the church.

We must see then that the offering of our bodies as living sacrifices, the radical transformation through renewed minds, the careful, honest evaluation of our gifts and abilities, the exercise of our ministry among others must have love as its foundation. This connection of body life and love is evident in 1 Corinthians 12-14 as well. Our sacrifices and our serving are all shaped and sustained by authentic love.

Shaped by Gracious Characteristics

John Stott is so helpful in showing how what appears to be a disjointed list of do's and don'ts relating to love is more than that. It is a beautiful composite picture of genuine, authentic love (Stott, *Romans*, p.330). Genuine love is characterized by being:

- Sincere It is genuine and authentic, never forced or fake.
- Discerning Hates evil and clings to good
- Affectionate Has a godly believe/want generated emotion
- Honors Esteems, values and honors others
- Enthusiastic Is zealous and fervent in a God-serving, God-oriented way.
- Joyful Serves and suffers well with a confident joy in a future hope
- Patient Is willing to wait in the midst of trouble and testing
- Prayerful Presses on in God-affirming prayer
- Generous Recognizes and meets needs of believers
- Hospitable Has an open heart to others that is reflected in an open home.

How we ought to pray for grace to be this kind of people with this kind of love: sincere, pure, affectionate, honors, enthusiastic, joyful, patient, prayerful, generous and hospitable. This gracious love marks believers with humility and harmony (Stott, p.333).

Reflect and Respond

Our relationships in our church – in the community of believers – requires self-sacrifice, radical transformation, grace-enabled use of gifts and powerfully authentic love. What an aim, what a vision statement this is for us together before God in this place.

Sacrifice, renew, exercise, love – for the glory of God