

Seeing the World through the Eyes of Another: Romans 12:14-16
 Ben Reaach, Three Rivers Grace Church
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We return to our study of Romans this morning, and I'll remind you where we're at. We are in chapter 12 now, and have already studied the first 13 verses of this chapter. We came to a significant transition in the letter at the close of chapter 11. The first 11 chapters teach us many essential truths of Christianity. They are chapters of deep theology. The sinfulness of mankind, the salvation that comes through Christ, the sovereignty of God in salvation . . . And now, beginning in chapter 12, we have the practical out workings of this message. We're now finding many specific instructions on how we are to live in light of the Gospel message, how we are to live as those who have a relationship with Jesus.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who preached hundreds of sermons from the book of Romans, said this about chapters 12 and following. "Some of us are tempted to stop with doctrine, and to feel that when we have come to the end of chapter 11, we have all we really want out of the Epistle to the Romans. That is fatal. We must take the whole of the Scripture, otherwise we shall miss its balance. And here in this whole section . . . the apostle is concerned with our practical, daily living." (426)

The challenge for us—the very constructive challenge—is to consider how our beliefs affect our behavior. How does our doctrine impact our daily living? There's a poem that hits on this theme (maybe you've heard it before) – it's called, "The Gospel According to You."

You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
 By deeds that you do, by words that you say.
 Men read what you write, whether faithless or true,
 Say, what is the gospel according to you?

You are writing each day a letter to men;
 Take care that the writing is true.
 'Tis the only gospel some men will read,
 That gospel according to you.

We can spend a lot of time thinking and studying and debating theological points. It's appropriate for us to do so. But we must take care that our lives reflect the grace of the Gospel which we work so hard to defend. Folks won't take the time to listen to our doctrine if they don't see something compelling in our lives.

So we're working our way slowly through these concrete commands of how we ought to conduct our lives. Let me read the entire chapter for us this morning, to remind you what we've already studied. This morning we'll focus on verses 14-16, and next week verses 17-21.

Verse 9 begins with the statement, "Let love be genuine." This serves as a heading for the instructions in the rest of the chapter. We have all these concise commands which may seem a bit disjointed. But they all seem to stem back to the theme of genuine love. As individuals who have been so radically changed by the love of God, our lives ought to reflect that love in the various relationships of our lives—relationships with other believers, relationships with unbelievers, and even in situations where others are persecuting us. By the grace of God, there is a way to be a loving person even in those cases.

I've entitle this sermon, "Seeing the World through the Eyes of Another." This is essential to being gracious and loving toward others. Part of showing love is to enter into another person's experience, to identify with them, to sympathize, to understand (or at least try to understand). When we can see the world through the eyes of a friend, or even an enemy, then, with God's help, we can start to feel love for that person and express love. I have 5 headings to guide us through these verses. Blessing, rejoicing, weeping, harmony, and humility.

Blessing

In verse 10 there were a couple "one another" commands. "Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor." There is a focus here particularly on our Christian brothers and sisters. Similarly in verse 13, "Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." These are ways that we express our love within the church family.

But Christian love does not stop there. Christian love is so powerful that it reaches out beyond the church, it reaches out even to those who hate us. And so we have this command—this unthinkable command, this counter-intuitive command—to bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

What is our natural reaction when someone persecutes us? What is the response of the flesh? It's to curse! We want to retaliate, get the person back for what they did to us. But that's not the way of Christ. What did Jesus say when He was hanging there on the cross? He said, Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing. Jesus was blessing His enemies. He was praying for them. And He was even, in a way, putting Himself in their shoes. Even though they were responsible for the evils they were

committing, Jesus knew that they were ignorant of the full significance of what was happening. He was looking at the world through their eyes, and thus showing tremendous compassion for them. And that even as He was experiencing the excruciating agony of the cross.

How does this apply to us? Well, are there folks in your life who are giving you a hard time? Are there people who tease you about your commitment to Christ? Or snub you? Or who do outright mean things to you, who are unfair toward you? How can you respond? The thought that comes to mind is, “Revenge. Payback!” But that’s not what we’re called to do. We’re called to bless and not curse.

I listened to a sermon this week by Tom Brown. Some of you remember several years ago when Will Brown and John Brown were students at Carnegie Mellon, and they both attended Three Rivers Grace. Their dad is a pastor, and we’ve been in touch with him lately because he’s partnering with a missions organization called Training Leaders International. Lord willing, we’ll have Tom come here at some point to share with us more about how we could be involved.

I really appreciated Tom’s sermon, and he shared a story that is a wonderful application of this command. He said that a woman came to him for counsel once who was distraught because of a co-worker of hers who was very mean, very manipulative, who would kiss up to the boss, and as a result that woman got all the attention, the recognition, the compliments, the raises, and the promotions. So Pastor Tom asked, “Well, what does this co-worker of yours like?” The woman was surprised by the question. Why would she care what this woman likes? When pressed, she said, “Well, I hear her talking about how much she likes pecan pie.” So Tom told her, I want you to get your hands on the best pecan pie recipe you can find, and make a pecan pie for this woman who has been so awful to you. And then I want you to give it to her, but do it in some way that she won’t know who gave it to her. The woman who had come for counsel was somewhat confused, but she followed the directions. And when they talked about it later, Pastor Tom asked her how it affected her. The woman said, “Well, my co-worker hasn’t changed. She’s still mean as ever. But something has changed inside of me. My heart has softened toward her. Now my feeling toward her is not so much a feeling of anger, but rather of pity.”

That’s great advice that Pastor Tom gave that woman, and it’s a very insightful response. When we bless those who persecute us, rather than curse them, there will be a softening of our hearts, there will be compassion even to those who seek to harm us. This can happen when we see the world through the eyes of that

person. What is driving them to be mean? Why is it that they are avoiding us, or making fun of us, or deliberately trying to hurt us? Well, it may be that they feel badly about their own lifestyle choices when they see the lives of people who genuinely love Jesus. That is threatening and uncomfortable. And what makes them feel better is to avoid Christians, or laugh at Christians, or try to get Christians angry so that they lose their cool. It may be that the person who is giving you a hard time is so miserable and has been so hurt by others, that all they know how to do is to be mean to people. So pity is a better response than anger.

Isn't God good to give us a command like this? When we find ourselves cursing others, that's a miserable place to be. We don't want to let the actions of others dictate our level of happiness and contentment and peace. How freeing it is, when someone hurts us, to be able to respond with blessing rather than cursing.

Rejoicing

Verse 15 says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep." Tell me: which of those do you think is more difficult? It depends some on the situation, I suppose. And each presents its own unique challenges. At first, we might think that to weep with those who weep is more challenging. But as we reflect further it seems that rejoicing with those who rejoice is actually the harder of the two. Why would that be? Because of pride and envy.

If you are a self-absorbed person, which is what we all are naturally . . . Apart from Christ, we are inward focused. We think of self, first and foremost. We worship self. And even as believers, we still struggle with our old way of thinking, with those sinful, selfish ways. For the self-absorbed person, it is impossible to really, truly rejoice with someone who is rejoicing.

We must remember that we're not talking just appearances here. We're talking about heartfelt, genuine rejoicing. It's one thing to plaster a smile on your face and say something that fits the occasion. "I'm so happy for you! Congratulations!" But it's quite another thing to sincerely celebrate the blessings of the Lord on someone else, especially when the blessing they got is the one I'm really craving.

The couple who desperately wants to have children, and hears of yet another couple in the church who are expecting. The person who is trying to advance his / her career, and a good friend gets an amazing promotion and raise. The single person who longs for marriage, and there's another wedding to attend. The evangelist or missionary or pastor or small group leader whose ministry seems to them to be insignificant, and they speak with

someone else who tells story after story of people being saved and the ministry growing by leaps and bounds.

It is an act of God to be able to rejoice with those who rejoice. Let this be an insight into your own soul. Let this be a test. Let this be a way of gauging your own spiritual condition. Let this be an area of self-examination that will prompt us to repent of our pride and jealousy, and ask for grace. We need grace to experience that wonderful and freeing peace that only Christians can experience.

We have promises, like Romans 8:16-17. “The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.” We are going to be heirs of the world, as Romans 4 says. We will lack no good thing. We will be as happy as we can be . . . forever.

There’s also the promise of Romans 8:28. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” With this foundation under us—the foundation of God’s promises to us—we don’t have to be jealous. Why would we be jealous? We can be content with the blessings God has bestowed upon us and content with the blessings he has graciously chosen to withhold from us. It’s in that place of contentment that we can really rejoice with those who rejoice. We can see the world through the eyes of another, and be happy with them. Not just a superficial smile while being eaten up with envy on the inside, but really being happy with them, thanking God for the blessing upon that person’s life.

Weeping

Weeping is important, too. This is another way that Christians show genuine love, and a way that we bear one another’s burdens. There is a lot of weeping in our world. It’s a fallen world, after all. But if we’re self-absorbed, we won’t give a second thought to the trials that others are facing. As long as it doesn’t affect my plans then it doesn’t bother me. But we need to pray for the compassion that Jesus has toward others, the compassion He has toward us.

The Bible records that Jesus wept at the death of His friend Lazarus. He was carrying out the exact thing this verse is calling us to do. Jesus saw Mary and others weeping, and He wept as well. And when the people saw Jesus weeping, they said, “See how he loved him!” Jesus’ weeping was a powerful display of His love.

When we weep with those who weep, our lives testify to the great work that God has done in our hearts. We have been given the grace to really see the world through the eyes of someone else, someone who is hurting.

Notice what this doesn't say, though. It doesn't say you have to be able to give a long, detailed theological response to the problem of suffering. It doesn't say that you have to preach a sermon to the person. It doesn't say that you need to give advice and counsel. You might feel at a loss of what to say to the person who is weeping. But it just says that we should weep with those who weep. I hope that will motivate us to move toward those who are hurting, rather than moving away from those who are hurting just because we feel awkward, just because we're not sure what to say.

Practice the ministry of presence. Just being present with those who are hurting communicates so much. Just sending a note saying, "I'm thinking of you. I care about you. I'm praying for you."

I remember when Stacy had a miscarriage in 2009 and we were grieving the loss of our baby. We felt the church weeping with us, and that meant a great deal to us.

Weeping with those who weep is also a way to show the love of Christ to those who don't know Christ yet. So many people are hurting in one way or another. And if you learn art of listening, the ministry of sympathy, then you will hear people pour out their hearts to you, even if they hardly know you. And those can be great opportunities to testify to the hope and comfort you have in your relationship with Jesus. Jesus suffered immensely so that one day all those who trust in Him will suffer no more. In heaven there will be no mourning or crying or pain anymore. That's the hope we have in the midst of our weeping, and it's the hope we can offer to others.

Harmony

The next command, now in verse 16, is to "live in harmony with one another." We learned earlier in this chapter about the unity we have as believers. Verses 4-5 of chapter 12 say, "For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." There's unity and diversity. We have different gifts, different personalities, different preferences, but we are united as one body. We serve together. And we are to serve together in harmony. If you're walking down the road, and one leg is trying to walk faster than the other leg, you're probably going to trip and fall. Or if one leg wants to turn right, and other leg wants to turn left, that's going to

be a problem, too. The many members of the body need to recognize their unique roles. And each member also needs to realize that we're part of the same body, and therefore we're all heading in the same direction. And we need to be cooperating with one another along the way.

The practical question for us is, "How do we live in harmony with one another when we inevitably will have different opinions, different ideas, different preferences, and different plans." With all of our differences, how can we cooperate harmoniously?

Alexander Strauch, who wrote a book on how to deal with conflict biblically, describes the following situation in a particular church. "A church I am acquainted with was being torn to pieces by petty jealousies among choir members. Two members were fighting over which of them should be choir director. One angrily threatened to leave the church if the other was appointed director. One man was resentful that another got to sing lead part more than he. Some parents were hurt because their adult children were turned down from joining the choir while the children of others, not so well liked, were included. Some musicians resented others who were more favored. There was lots of petty bickering about unfairness and not being properly recognized. Self-interest and small-minded jealousy dominated the choir and caused division in the congregation."

That's enough to make me glad we don't have a choir! But of course the issue is not whether you have a choir or not. The issue is the attitude of the people. Where there is jealousy and pride and competition, there cannot be harmony.

Let me give you a few bullet points here for how to pursue harmony. This is by no means exhaustive, but just a few pointers for how we should begin thinking about dealing with conflict in a way that honors the Lord and builds up relationships rather than tearing them down. And these points apply to our relationships within the church, also our friendships in general, in your relationship with your spouse and between parents and children . . . Has there been any conflict in your life lately? I would think that everyone here could say "yes" to that, unless you've been living under a rock. So this is very relevant. How can we live in harmony with one another?

1) Let love be genuine, as Romans 12:9 says. In our personal lives we should be cultivating the very things this passage is instructing. Alexander Strauch writes that "Love lowers the temperature of most conflicts by refusing to engage in retaliation." I like that imagery. Conflicts can heat up or cool down, depending on how we react. If our blood boils and vicious

words spew out of our mouths, that's moving things in the wrong direction. "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." (Proverbs 15:1) Let's face it: conflict is inevitable. But here's the upside: conflict does not need to be destructive. Conflict can actually be very constructive. Different ideas can be refining and productive. The problem is when two people, with different opinions, start to dig in their heels and get ugly about it. But with humility and love, differences of opinion can complement each other and produce a plan that is more effective than either of the original ideas would have been.

2) Fight against the works of the flesh and pray for the fruit of the Spirit. Just listen to the list of works of the flesh and fruit of the Spirit and notice how many of them have to do with personal relationships. Take note of how directly the works of the flesh contribute to destructive conflict, and how directly the fruit of the Spirit will serve to foster harmony. "Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law." (Galatians 5:19-23)

We can also go to the love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 and realize how genuine love will foster unity and harmony. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

3) Look at the situation from the perspective of the other person. Give the benefit of the doubt. If at all possible, assume that the person with whom you disagree has good intentions. Don't jump to conclusions about the sinister plans they have. Don't make up conspiracy theories. Try to think the best. If you put yourself in their shoes, maybe their words and actions will make a little more sense. And then you can respond in compassion and patience rather than suspicion and anger.

4) Keep short accounts. When a conflict arises that could threaten the harmony among believers, don't ignore it. Rather, go to that person and talk about it. Pray first. And then go and discuss the matter directly with the person you have a disagreement with. Matthew 18:15 tells this to us plainly. "If your

brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother.” And I would say that’s a wise principle to follow even when it’s not a matter of sin. A difference of opinion, a misunderstanding . . . my advice would be to talk about it rather than ignore it. Go out of your way to pursue harmony. When there is a conflict with someone, move toward that individual in love. Whenever there is something uncomfortable, something unharmonious, the natural inclination is to avoid those situations, those individuals. But the Gospel response is to move toward that person in love, eager to forgive (if someone has sinned against you), eager to give grace, eager to admit your own faults, eager to reconcile.

Another key to harmony is humility, and this takes us to our 5th and final heading.

Humility

The rest of verse 16 says, “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.” These three admonitions all speak to the issue of humility. To be haughty is the opposite of humility. It’s to be puffed up, arrogant, prideful. It’s to think of oneself as better than others. It’s to be wise in one’s own eyes. That is deceptive and dangerous.

But it takes an act of God to bring down that house of cards. It is a house of cards. It has no firm foundation. But in our minds we can be so convinced of our own opinions, that nobody can convince us otherwise. And so it takes an act of God, changing us from the inside out, infusing into our hearts a liberating humility, such that our eyes open, as if for the first time, and we see the world through the eyes of others. We can now see that other people have legitimate and helpful perspectives on many, many issues. We can actually learn from them. We don’t have to pretend to be a know-it-all anymore.

With this new, God-given, view on life, we must no longer look through the lens of worldly distinctions and prejudices. We delight to spend time with those who are “lower” than us in the world’s eyes—those who don’t have as much. That phrase could be translated differently. It could also mean, “give yourselves to humble tasks.” There’s some ambiguity there in the Greek phrase. But either way, both are evidences of humility. To hang out with folks who are not as privileged, and to spend time serving in tasks that don’t get a lot of fanfare, these are evidences of God’s grace in the lives of believers.

It’s this kind of humility that demonstrates genuine Christian love. It’s this kind of humility that fosters profound unity and harmony among believers. And it’s this kind of humility

that really enables us to see the world through the eyes of another so that we can bless those who persecute us, so that we can rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

I want to close by reading from a letter that John Newton wrote to a friend of his, giving him some really godly advice as to how he should go about disagreeing with another Christian. John Newton was the writer of “Amazing Grace.” He was a wonderful pastor in England in the 1700s. Well, a friend of his was going to write an article on a controversial theological topic, an important topic—having to do with God’s sovereignty in salvation. This friend of Newton was hoping to refute the man-centered theology of another minister. If you’re familiar with the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism, that’s what this had to do with. Newton and his friend were both Calvinists. Newton’s friend was publishing an article refuting Arminian theology.

Here are some of the things Newton told his friend. First, pray for this person with whom you disagree. Praying for him will help change your own attitude toward him. Second, remember that “the Lord loves [this man] and bears with him; therefore you must not despise him, or treat him harshly . . . In a little while you will meet him in heaven . . . and though you may find it necessary to oppose his errors, view him personally as a kindred soul, with whom you are to be happy in Christ for ever.”

Third, remember that God is the one who will have to change a person’s view of things, so deal kindly. Fourth, Newton counseled his friend to be mindful of the fact that others would be reading this article and would notice the tone in which it is written. He says, “If our zeal is embittered by expressions of anger, invective, or scorn, we may think we are doing service to the cause of truth, when in reality we shall only bring it into discredit. . . . You may be instrumental to the edification [of the readers] if the law of kindness as well as of truth regulates your pen, otherwise you may do them harm.” In other words, don’t be man in defending the truth. That’s not fitting for a Christian. And finally, Newton advised his friend to beware of how controversy could wreak havoc in his own life. “We find but very few writers of controversy who have not been manifestly hurt by it. Either they grow in a sense of their own importance, or imbibe an angry contentious spirit . . . What will it profit a man if he gains his cause, and silences his adversary, if at the same time he loses the humble, tender frame of spirit in which the Lord delights . . . Your aim, I doubt not, is good; but you have need to watch and pray, for you will find Satan at your right hand to resist you.” (from *The Works of John Newton*, 1:268-74. Quoted by Strauch in an article “Wise Advice from John Newton.”)

I would encourage you, in your conflicts— theological or otherwise—to heed this wise advice. When you're about to write that post or send that email or confront that friend, consider how God would have you live in harmony with others. And remember not to be wise in your own eyes, but to see the world through the eyes of others.