

How We Should Relate to One Another

Romans 12:9-21

September 25, 2011

We have seen Paul's presentation and defense of the gospel as he has sought to convince the Christians in Rome, both Jewish and Gentile that we all come to God on the same basis—God's grace and forgiveness offered through the blood of Jesus Christ, shed on the cross. After presenting this truth over the course of most of the letter, Paul is finally getting to the question of how we should live as a result. We looked at the short answer to this question several weeks back. Namely, we are to offer ourselves as living sacrifices even as Jesus offered Himself on the cross. This morning we begin the rest of the journey through this letter as we look at life in light of the cross.

Now that Paul has laid the foundation for how we are to live our lives, he gets practical. What does offering ourselves as living sacrifices mean? What does it look like? If we are not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought, how are we to think of ourselves? These are the questions Paul sets out to answer here. He does it with a string of otherwise unconnected statements. There is little holding this passage together except the theme of showing us how we are to act toward each other.

Paul started with **love**. "*Love must be sincere.*" (v.9) In the New International Version it is the first word. In the Greek, it comes right after the article. Our relationships with each other are to be marked and characterized by love. Love, in turn, is to be characterized by sincerity. We are to love each other

sincerely. Love does not have to be emotional, but it does have to be real. We need to sincerely take on one another's burdens as our own. We are patient and kind. We do not envy or boast. We rejoice in the truth. We share one another's lives and lift one another's burdens.

Part of loving one another means having a proper respect for the truth. "*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*" (v.9) This is part of that sincerity. If I see evil in the body of Christ and I do nothing about it I am not loving the body. We need to hold on fast to what is good in ourselves, the church, and our society, and reject what is evil.

"*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.*" (v.10) This is one of the ways you can tell whether or not a person belongs in the church. When conflict comes up are they more devoted to being right and their position than they are to the congregation? We are to be most committed to God and the truth He has revealed in His word. If you discover that the whole Church has run after what the scripture calls a lie, then you have a responsibility to speak the truth and turn the Church back. If you cannot, then you must leave that Church for one that holds to the truth. By the same token, if you disagree on a lesser matter, or cannot find fault in the scripture with the position the Church has taken, then you are to be more committed to that community of faith than you are to your own position. You may be right, but your devotion to the members of the body of Christ is to be greater than your devotion to **winning** the argument.

Part of the way we protect the Church and keep things in the proper perspective is by following Paul's

next command. *“Honor one another above yourselves.”* (v.10) We have a natural tendency to look for the best in ourselves and the worst in others. Paul tells us to fight that by reversing it. Make every effort to see the good in others and to consider them ahead of yourself. It’s probably not true that they are better than you or deserving of more honor. It just gets rid of your sinful tendency to consider yourself better and deserving of more honor than them.

“Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” (v.11) Fight hard for your faith. Be zealous for God. God has purchased you for Himself through the blood of His Son, Jesus, shed on the cross for the forgiveness of your sins. It is through God’s grace offered through that cross, and only through that grace, that you can be saved. Remember that. Meditate on it. Get excited about it. Let it fuel and motivate your life. Be zealous for the truth. Be amazed that the Creator of the universe not only knows who you are, but that He paid for your sin so you might come to know Him! We get so excited over games, movies, and the other things of this world, yet they pale in comparison with this truth! Be zealous for the God who sacrificed for you! Never lose your spiritual fervor! Serve the Lord with all you’ve got because it’s all a gift from Him anyway.

Even so, things will not always go your way. We live in a world that is hostile to the things of God and that doesn’t understand Him. Even as we serve God with zeal and fervor, we need to be reminded of Paul’s next command. *“Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.”* (v.12) We have our hope in God.

Put your joy there, not in how well things are going in this life. Things will not go well here long, so enjoy the truth that God holds you and your future. If you are His, then, regardless of what happens to you here, you will live with Him eternally in heaven.

Bad times are not permanent either. We must be patient in affliction. When things are going wrong, especially when we are suffering for obeying God’s word, we must be patient. We know that God has not forgotten us. We know that we are in His hands. We do not need to worry or fear. If He gave so much to get us, He’s not going to let us go easily. If He loves us enough to die for us, He will not let our afflictions last forever. Those who are in Christ are promised that their afflictions last for a short while and then give way to an eternity with their loving heavenly Father.

Whether things are good or bad, we are to be **faithful** in prayer. We are to be grateful to God when things are going well. We are to pour our hearts out to Him when things are going badly. In all things we are to bathe ourselves with the Father’s presence and invite the power and working of the Holy Spirit. We are to give ourselves to God and seek His strength and protection through our time with Him in prayer. Without it we cannot do the other things Paul has already told us to do.

Next, we are to be generous. We looked at Paul’s instructions to the Ephesian Church through Timothy last week. That same command is given to the Roman Church here. *“Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”* (v.13) We are to make certain that we work hard so that we have something to contribute to the community and provide for those who

cannot provide for themselves. We are also to be hospitable to one another. We open our lives and our homes to the other members of the congregation as we share our lives together and grow in God's grace.

All this is good as long as we are getting along. What happens when there are differences? Well, first, if we are devoted to the truth and to one another in brotherly love, differences will be minimal and generally not important. Still, conflict will arise—if not within the Church, then from outside. The day will come when someone will curse us. We will hear those who wish us ill instead of wishing us well. Paul says our response should not be in kind. *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”* (v.14) If they persecute us we must pray for them. This is not an imprecatory prayer—“Lord, pluck out their eyes and deafen their ears that they may know the error of their ways.” No, it is a prayer that seeks their benefit—that God would give them the grace of showing them the truth and helping them accept it so that we might be restored in our relationship with them. We must seek their good, not their harm. We are not to curse them in return.

Two more things need to be noted about this command, indeed we could go on with it for a while. First, it is a command that came from **Jesus**. Paul did not come up with this idea. He is quoting Jesus. It is Jesus who both told us to love and pray for our enemies, and who died showing us how to do it as He prayed for those who crucified Him. Second, not all of your enemies are outside of the church. As we have already seen there will be those in the church who are more committed to having their way than they are to the truth

of God and the fellowship of believers. We are to bless all who persecute us, wherever they are found.

Love is lived out among us in another way. *“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”* (v.15) Because we genuinely and sincerely love one another we will rejoice with those of our number who rejoice, and we will mourn with those who mourn. We will cry tears over each other's sorrow and celebrate with each other's victories. This is all part of Christian fellowship.

All of this is wrapped up in the idea of living in harmony with each other. Paul wrote, *“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”* (v.16) We seek to be on the same page, to be in **agreement**. We are not to be proud, but looking for the places where we are wrong and willing to be corrected. We are to be willing to associate with all God calls here and not only the people like us or the people of high social standing. Nothing destroys harmony like conceit. This is helped by remembering where we stand before God. It is why it was so important for Paul to demonstrate that, *“God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”* (Romans 11:32) If we understand the gospel, we cannot be conceited. A seventeenth century Puritan pastor, Stephen Charnock, noted, “A proud faith is as much a contradiction as a humble devil.” We cannot be proud if we truly understand what God has done for us. Once we realize how lowly we are we will be willing to spend time and energy on anybody to whom God brings us.

Likewise, we are to refrain from doing evil. *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”* (vv.17,18) We are to do what is right and stand for the **truth**. Beyond that, we are to try to live at peace with others. Too often the church falls off one side of these commands or the other. In striving to live at peace with the world, God’s people are tempted to join in the world’s evil and sin. We cannot do that. We are kingdom people called to live by the principles and rules of God’s kingdom. Our actions and attitudes must be holy in His eyes. We must not do anything that would allow the people around us, in the church or outside of it, to say we are sinning, or not living according to the word of God.

In holding to biblical truth, however, many Christians get mean and abrasive. The gospel causes enough offense on its own without our attitudes and actions having to add to the offense. We must stand for the truth, but we must do so in as understanding and loving a way as possible. We are to seek **peace** as much as we can.

Part of seeking peace means leaving punishment and vengeance to God. *“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord.”* (v.19) Paul will go on to say later that punishment of evil doers is a proper function of government. Here he is talking to individuals. God will take care of making sure those who sin and hurt others are punished for their sins. We are not to seek revenge. We are to pray for those

who persecute us and try to be at peace with them. God’s justice is perfect. Many times the Old Testament writers, from Moses on, talk about the fact that God will not leave sin unpunished. One example is Nahum who wrote, *“The LORD is slow to anger and great in power; the LORD will not leave the guilty unpunished.”* (Nahum 1:3)

God’s word is full of commands to not seek revenge for wrongs done to us but instead to leave it up to God. Indeed, Paul goes on to quote Proverbs 25:21,22. *“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”* As we seek to live at peace and to seek good for those who seek to harm us, as we feed our hungry enemies and give water to those who seek to hurt us, we both increase their guilt in continuing to mistreat us, and we shame them before God and a watching world.

The people to whom Paul was writing would soon live this out as they fell under the persecution of Nero. There were a lot of Christians in Rome by then and they mostly lived in a couple of sections of the city. When Nero burned Rome so he could rebuild it to his honor and as he wanted the areas where the Christians lived were largely spared while the rest of the city was destroyed. This led to a great persecution of the Christians as Nero blamed them for the fire. The city had not understood the Christians before and generally disliked them. Now that mistrust and fear turned to hate. As the people watched the Christians being rounded up, arrested, and killed attitudes began to change. They saw

the response of the Christians to what was being done to them. They saw their faith and the patient endurance. The people saw that these persecuted and cursed followers of Jesus generally did not respond in kind, but instead prayed for the city and those who were leading the persecution against them.

Public opinion swayed again. While the city still did not know what to make of the Christians, they saw that the Christians were not the sort to try to burn down the city. Even if the Christians were strange, odd, and maybe a little dangerous from a religious perspective, the Romans began to believe that they did not deserve the level of persecution Nero was meting out. The city turned against Nero and the church enjoyed some peace.

This is just one of many examples of the church trusting God and living out the last of Paul's commands in this morning's text. "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" (v.21) Regardless of the way things often look in this world, evil does not have the last word, nor will it win in the end. God is still in control, and as the Creator of all that exists He is far more powerful than the forces that are arrayed against Him and His people. Trusting in God, and relying on the Holy Spirit will preserve us. We do not need to be overcome with evil as Cain was when he killed Abel. Instead we have the power of God to overcome evil with good. We can bless those who mean us harm. We must be wise and not seek situations that cause conflict. Yet we do not need to fear for our God is with us and punishment belongs to Him.

So, how are we to relate to one another? In short we are to love and be at peace with each other, and as

much as we can with the world around us. Love God. Be zealous for Him and serve Him with fervor. Hope and endure in Him. Do your best to love those around you and to bless your enemies. Leave the rest up to God.