



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

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**RUNNING THE RACE:
A LOOK AT THE LIFE IN CHRIST FROM THE BOOK OF ROMANS**

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Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 1: The Runners *Sinful Man and the Sinless Christ*

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Lesson 1: The Runners

Sinful Man and the Sinless Christ

INTRODUCTION

“Running the Race” is a 10-lesson study on the book of Romans. Now, many people shy away from the book of Romans because they think it’s too “deep.” Too heavy on the theology stuff. Too hard to understand.

But it’s not. Romans is an incredibly practical book. You could spend your entire life studying it and keep on getting insights out of it for daily life and living. This course approaches the book from the standpoint of the life we live in Christ. Each lesson will look at a separate aspect of running this race that we’re all in – and will take us from the starting block to the finish line, covering each step of the way.

As a side note, please bear in mind that this course is a thematic study of Romans: we will not go consecutively through the book chapter by chapter. The reason for this is because the same ideas are often dealt with in separate chapters. So in order to address each topic fully, we will often be looking at passages from several different places.

SINFUL MAN

So let’s begin. This lesson sets up the race ... “The Runners: Sinful Man and the Sinless Christ.”

The Presence of Sin

We begin with who we are. And the reason we begin here is because it’s important to know who we are, and what we’ve been saved from. If we don’t understand that, we won’t grasp the incredible nature of the life we now have in Christ.

Romans is very clear on this point of who we are and where we start in life. Romans 3:23 states the case clearly: “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” The thought is repeated several times throughout the book, including in Romans 3:9, “We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.”

- ❖ All have sinned. Everyone. But a lot of people don't think they're sinners. What are some of the reasons they give? (i.e., "Compared to Adolf Hitler, I'm a saint!")
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Perhaps at one point you didn't consider yourself to be a sinner. Certainly, this is one of the barriers we're up against as we try to spread the gospel ... people often simply do not see themselves as sinners.

- ❖ How would you explain to someone that they are a sinner if they hold to one of the beliefs we just noted above?
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The Path of Sin

Now, in addition to recognizing that we are sinners, it's important to look at how sin progresses. The path it takes. First, because it gives us a better understanding of the history of the human race; and second, because it's still how sin works in us today.

We knew the truth.

The place to start is to realize that mankind – and you and I – know the truth. Romans 1:19-20 makes that very clear: "since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

This is very interesting: God made the truth known to everyone through the creation. The one "book" that everyone could read. The created universe is known as "general revelation." From it, we can know some very general things about God. The Bible is known as "special revelation." From it, we can learn some very specific things about God.

What can we learn from the creation? Romans 1:20 lists just two qualities: God's eternal power, and his divine nature. From creation, we can't know his plan of salvation, we can't know that he will provide for all our needs, we don't even know much about his character as a loving God. But we all can see two things very clearly from the universe around us, from the most distant quasar to the spider spinning its web in our garden: first, God is very powerful to have created all this; and second, he is above it all – divine – since he did create it all.

What is the obvious course of action for weak, created beings when faced with a powerful, divine God? It should be worship. Possibly worship from fear, possibly worship from love, but worship, nevertheless.

This completely trashes the idea that people have that "I didn't know any better." Romans says clearly: we all knew better. We all knew the truth.

We denied the truth.

Having established that man knew he should worship God, based – if upon nothing else – upon the evidence of his power and divinity displayed in nature, Paul next moves on to point out the progression of sin: we denied the truth.

We knew the truth, but we denied the truth. Romans 1:21 states, "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened."

We refused to worship. We refused to give thanks.

❖ Why would we deny the truth?

Now look at the result – our thinking became futile – useless, pointless, and purposeless – and our hearts became foolish and dark. Refusal to worship and glorify God will always result in futility in thought, mind, and action.

We exchanged the truth.

Finally, we exchanged the truth. Romans 1:22-23 and 25 reads, "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised."

We exchanged the truth for a lie. We knew the truth, but we denied it. But there is, as Pascal said long ago, a “God-shaped vacuum” in each of us. If we won’t fill it with God, we will attempt to fill it with something else ... usually with something we think we can control or manipulate. Something that will give us “what we want” and cater to our pride.

But everything else is created – they “worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” – therefore, everything else is less than God. And because it is less than God, it will never fill that hole inside.

We have the progression here: we knew the truth, we denied the truth, we exchanged the truth. We exchanged it for things that are less than God, and that therefore do not satisfy. That is the path that sin takes. Which returns us to the point we made a moment ago: refusing to worship and glorify God results in futility.

- ❖ What are some of the things people attempt to fill their lives with instead of God? Why are they futile as ends in themselves?

Do we as Christians still fall prey to this type of futile thinking? Sometimes, yes. Though we have accepted Christ as Lord, we still need to die to self daily. And we fall for the same reason: we know the truth, but we deny it and exchange it for a lie ... the lie that we need something other than God to satisfy us.

The Extent of Sin

It’s appropriate at this point to examine an extensive list that Paul gives of what sin looks like. The list is given, I think, for two reason: to drive home the seriousness of sin, and to drive home that we are all sinners ... because we’ve all fallen in at least one of these areas.

He begins with sexual immorality. In Romans 1:24 and 26-27 it reads, “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies

with one another Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.”

I find it interesting that Paul begins with sexual immorality. In fact, after discussing that men knew, denied, and exchanged the truth, it says, “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity ...” Therefore. You may have heard it said that a “therefore” is “there for” something.

Sexual immorality is a direct and immediate consequence of turning away from God and worshipping something less than God. We see one of the reasons for this in I Corinthians 6:18-20: “Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”

There’s something very precious about our bodies, and something very holy about sex. After all, the marriage union is supposed to be a picture of the union between Christ and the Church. It is intimate, unique, holy, and special. It is not surprising, then, that that is where sin attacks first and hardest when we turn away from God.

But Paul doesn’t stop there. In Romans 1:28-32, he gives a litany that leaves no room for doubt as to the character and extent of sin: “Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

There are many points we could derive out of this list, but let’s look at just one: Paul puts envy and gossiping right next to murder. The reason? Sin is sin is sin. It is all terrible, because it all separates you from God. In James 2:10-11 it reads, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. For he who said, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ also said, ‘Do not murder.’ If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.”

We tend to categorize sins into “big” sins and “little” sins ... and somehow think that a life of little sins won’t separate us from God. But that is not what Paul says here, or what James says as we just read.

Let me quote for a moment from one of the books I wrote called *Wasteland* (available at www.SinkYourRoots.com). In this passage, the narrator, who is himself a murderer, is speaking on the subject of sin:

In the social structure and order that I hope you enjoy, it is easy to feel contempt and embarrassment when the mention of sin is made. Sin is a gross term. An ugly one. We prefer to label it, “Freedom of choice.” “Alternative lifestyles.” “Situational ethics.” “Tolerance.” It’s fine to label a murderer as a murderer—unless, of course, that murderer holds political office, or is an upstanding citizen, or a savvy lawyer. Then it is a matter of “extenuating circumstances,” and at best, “manslaughter,” or preferably “temporary insanity.”

But to define wrong as sin, and to use images such as leprosy in order to convey it—that is a social *faux pas* of the first order. But that, too, is the first symptom of sin: for just as leprosy destroys nerve-endings so that the victim is not aware of decaying and wounded and rotting flesh, so also sin deadens our senses so that we are unaware of our decaying and wounded and rotting souls.

We throw a thousand excuses at sin. We claim that our dysfunctional families and society made us what we are. We agree that if it feels good, and doesn’t hurt anyone, it can’t be wrong. We affirm that if the end is good, any means is justified in attaining it.

But this is all hypocrisy and self-justification. Just as we claim that there are little sins and big ones. For if murder is the destruction of the body, isn’t gossip the destruction of trust? Slander the destruction of relationships? Adultery the destruction of fidelity? Isn’t anger as sharp a blow as physical abuse, and isn’t gluttony as much an orgy as alcoholism? And for the passive sins—isn’t sloth the killer of ingenuity? Pride the hammer-blow to equality? Envy the destroyer of peace?

From that quote, we see clearly that sin isn’t something to be casual about. Any sin. From gossip to murder, it all separates us from a holy God.

❖ Do you tend to classify sins in your head? If so, how do you classify them?

❖ What sins do you tend to excuse in yourself? In others? Why?

- ❖ What are some of the sins you fall prey to most easily? Why?

The Consequence of Sin

Which leads us to our next points: What does God think about us and our sin?

Romans 1:18 pulls no punches: “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Romans 2:5-6 follows up this point, “But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God ‘will give to each person according to what he has done.’”

Wrath and judgement. That is the consequence of our sin. That is why we need to take it seriously. That is why we must, every day, put God first to avoid exchanging the truth of God for a lie.

- ❖ Are people comfortable talking about the wrath and judgment of God? Why or why not?

- ❖ Why is it important to talk about God’s wrath and judgment when sharing the gospel of Christ?

Fortunately, wrath and judgement are only part of what God thinks about us and our sin. The other part is found hinted at in Romans 2:3-4, “So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show

contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?"

We see here that God extends toward us kindness, tolerance, and patience ... desiring our repentance. And that brings us, at last, to the other Runner in this race: the Sinless Christ.

THE SINLESS CHRIST

Christ is the reason we are in this race at all. Without him, we wouldn't qualify to set foot on the starting line!

Now, keep everything we've said up to this point in mind: we are sinners. All of us. We knew that God was worthy of worship, and we turned our backs on him. We tried to fill up the God-vacuum inside us with things like fame, money, power, and sex. We fell into deep, pervasive sin, sin that touched every area of our lives. God, the holy God, was justly full of wrath against us, and had every right to mete out immediate and terrible judgement on us.

But instead, he sent his own Son, Jesus Christ.

The Timing of God

First, look at the timing of God. Romans 5:6 says, "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly."

God didn't wait for us to try to get our act together ... he knew that was impossible.

He didn't wait for us to seek him ... he knew we wouldn't.

He didn't wait for us to recognize our sinfulness ... he knew we didn't care.

No, God sent Jesus when we were still ungodly and happy to be that way. That's love.

The Inclusivity of God

Second, the inclusivity of God. If Romans 5:6 pays special attention to the "when," then Romans 5:7-8 emphasizes the "who": "Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."

He died for us while we were sinners. We were all in the same boat, and he died for everyone. I'm so glad that Paul took the time to point out that everyone was a sinner ... because that means

that Christ died for all. He didn't die for some special sub-group of people ... Jews or Germans or whites or blacks or the rich or the poor. No, he died for sinners. We all qualify.

- ❖ But let me ask ... are we sometimes tempted to withhold the good news of what Jesus did from some people, because we think they're not "worthy" of it? If so, who?
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- ❖ If you are having trouble loving some person or group of people, and don't want to share the gospel with them, what can you do to overcome that attitude?
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On a side note, this point – that God saved me when I was a sinner – is tremendously encouraging to me, because I am often overwhelmed by my own sinfulness. Now. As a Christian. How refreshing to know that Christ died for me when I was completely unregenerate! If he loved me so much when I had no knowledge of him or love of him at all, how much more can I be confident that he loves me now, when I'm trying to follow him and obey him!

The Generosity of God

This brings us to the generosity of God. Romans 5:15-17 reads, "But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

We see here that the abundance of God's gift, his generosity, is expressed. This is no measly salvation! God is not miserly with his grace! Hear the words: grace ... gift ... overflow ... abundant provision ... life.

We were starving and he sat us down at a feast.
We were homeless and he gave us a palace.
We were naked and he clothed us in royal robes.
We were poor and he bestowed on us riches without measure.
We were dead ... and he raised us to life!

- ❖ What is your view of God? Do you truly understand and grasp his generosity, or do you have an image of him as harsh and miserly, a Judge with no mercy? Where did your view of God come from? Do you need to modify your view of God in light of this lesson?
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The Power of God

Next, it is important to stress here the power of God: he came at the right time, he came for the ungodly, he is magnificently generous ... and he is absolutely powerful. Christ is all that is needed. All that we will ever need.

Romans 5:18-19 puts it this way: “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”

This is important because sometimes people think they are “too bad” for God to love them and forgive them. Paul squashes that thought completely: Christ is all in all. Christ’s obedience brings life to everyone. No one is left out. His sacrifice was complete for you and me.

- ❖ Think of the “worst” person you know of: perhaps a terrorist you’ve heard of in the news, a despot who ruled at sometime in history, or a violent criminal. What is your reaction to realize that Christ died for them, and that if they were to believe at any time in their life, Christ’s death would make them righteous? Do you find that idea freeing, or somehow offensive? Why?
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The Effectiveness of God

Finally, Christ's sacrifice was effective. Specifically, what was the effect? Romans 5 lists three points:

First, we were justified. Romans 5:9 reads, "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"

- ❖ What does it mean to be justified?
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But it's important to remember always that God didn't simply wipe a blackboard clean and dust off his hands. That would be ignoring the problem. No, we were bought with a price (I Corinthians 6:20). We were justified by his blood. This cost God his best and most precious – the life of his Son. But because Jesus was willing to pay that price, we could then be justified.

Second, we were reconciled. Romans 5:10-11 states, "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Think of this ... we weren't just ignorant folk who were introduced to God because we hadn't known him before. No, we are described as "God's enemies." Sin does that. It sets us actively against the holy God. At war with him. Reconciliation isn't an introduction ... it's a much stronger word than that. It implies a history of estrangement, adversity, and warfare – transformed by forgiveness and acceptance and trust into a love relationship.

- ❖ Frequently, when we talk about the unsaved, we refer to them as "lost." And that is true and accurate. But they are also "enemies of God." That is also a true and accurate statement. How does that description make you feel? How does it make you feel to realize that you, too, were at one time an enemy of God?
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Third, we were given eternal life. Romans 5:21 assures us that “so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Salvation isn't just here and now grace ... it's a future of eternal joy with Jesus Christ. Christianity is a future-looking faith – a faith that has a hope that is so sure and steadfast that it can be reached out and touched: for our hope is in the Person of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION

In the next lesson, we'll begin to run that race: we'll look at the starting line – faith – and how we go about developing strength. But for now, let's close with this exhortation from Hebrews 12:1-2, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 2: Developing Strength

How Trials Form Our Character

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Lesson 2: Developing Strength

How Trials Form Our Character

REVIEW

In the first lesson, we looked at the runners in this race ... at sinful man and the sinless Christ. We reviewed that we are sinners: we knew that God existed and should be worshipped but we refused to do so and rebelled against him, sinking into every kind of depravity. We then looked at how God sent his Son, Jesus Christ: at the right time, for all people, with the power to save, giving freely and abundantly, reconciling us to himself and giving us the hope of heaven.

THE STARTING LINE

This salvation is ours by faith as a gift of God through his grace. You might say that's the starting line – righteousness by faith alone. That's where we begin our long race – without it, we're disqualified from even running! We see this clearly in Romans 5:1-2: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."

We are justified by faith. Let's take a look at this point for a minute before going on to the main focus of the lesson today.

❖ What are some things other than faith that people have tried – or are trying – to be saved by?

Not by Works

The most common thing is trying to earn salvation by works. You hear that all the time – anytime someone says, "Sure I'm going to heaven ... I'm a good person!" That means that they're trying to be saved by works. Various world religions try that route, cults, philosophies ... we all think we can do it on our own.

❖ What does Scripture say about that?

Not by Race or Nationality or Family

People also often think they can be saved because they are a certain race or nationality or family. For instance, the Germans were convinced that the Aryan race was the epitome of humanity, the Jews felt their nationality was their safeguard, and people all through time have assumed that because of their family, they'll get to heaven ... "Well, my father is a preacher" or the Pharisees' "We have Abraham for our father."

❖ What does Scripture say about that?

Not by Knowledge or Enlightenment

Finally, people often think that they can earn salvation by being "enlightened." The Gnostics of old and the New Agers of today are particularly keen on that. "I know something you don't, therefore I'm saved and you're not."

❖ What does Scripture say about that?

Salvation by Faith

The Scripture says that we're justified by faith alone. Not by works, not by race, not by knowledge.

That is a tremendously reassuring statement, because it means salvation is open to everyone. It's open to the worst sinners, because it's not based on works. There's no scale involved here. It's open to people of every race, economic class, and political outlook. There's no prejudice in God's kingdom ... a welcome change from ours! It's open to people who are at every level of intellect, because it's not what you know, but who you know.

Salvation by faith ... a breath of fresh air, and the starting line of the "Life in Christ" marathon we're all running.

So now let's turn to running this race.

DEVELOPING STRENGTH

Let's think about this from an ordinary, physical perspective. Suppose you'd spent your whole life wandering around aimlessly. And you suddenly find yourself – without any kind of preparation or training – in a marathon. What's the first thing you're going to need to do?

That's right – build up some strength! We're weak when we begin to run. Your muscles – or lack thereof – are screaming. Your breath is coming in gasps. Your side is cramping. You're completely out of shape.

The same happens when we accept Christ: we're saved, but when we begin running, we're completely out of shape. All those sins we've just been saved from are still very much present, waiting to reach out and trip us up. We have no stamina. We don't really know what we're doing. What we need to do is develop strength ... not physical strength, but spiritual strength.

That brings us to our key passage of the lesson: Romans 5:3-5: "Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

This is one of those difficult passages of Scripture. I want the end product – character and hope – but I could really do without the suffering and perseverance!

Let's take it apart little by little, and see what this passage has to tell us.

Suffering

First, let's look at suffering.

- ❖ What kind of suffering is there?

- ❖ Why do we suffer? What are the causes of suffering?

- ❖ Now let's look at what happens when we are experiencing these various kinds of suffering. What happens inside us when we suffer?

Physical Effects: _____

Mental Effects: _____

Emotional Effects: _____

Spiritual Effects: _____

It's interesting to note that while suffering can happen in just one area, say, physical sickness, any kind of suffering seems to affect all four areas of our lives: physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual.

The results seem pretty lousy. Yet Paul wrote that suffering can result in very good things ... perseverance, character, and hope. How can that be?

Rejoice!

I think the key is found in Romans 5:3 ... “we also rejoice in our sufferings ...”

This does not mean that we rejoice because we are suffering or at the sufferings themselves. Suffering was not part of God’s original design. It’s purely the result of our fallen nature. Only a masochist rejoices in his own suffering ... and that mindset is decidedly unnatural and unhealthy.

No. We are not called to say, “Great! Praise God, I’m feeling terrible!” That’s ridiculous. But we are called to praise God in the midst of our sufferings. We are to keep our focus and our attitude right. And *that* is the entire key to turning suffering from a tragedy into a blessing.

First, our focus. If we are rejoicing, we’re directing praise and thanksgiving to someone ... namely, to God. Therefore, to say that we are to rejoice in our sufferings is to say that we are to keep our eyes focused on God. Suffering, in our human nature, turns our focus inward: like a wounded animal, we curl in around our pain. But God calls us to look upward to him, and to keep our eyes focused on him.

Second, our attitude. We’re to look up at God, not with resentment and bitterness, but with praise and thanksgiving. We are to rejoice. At what? At what he provides us in the midst of our suffering: his presence, his promises, his grace, his strength, his comfort.

If we do those two things: keep our focus and our attitude correct, then suffering will not destroy us: it will transform us.

- ❖ Jot down a time when you suffered and had a bad focus and attitude, and a time when you suffered and had a good focus and attitude.

- ❖ What happened when you had a good focus and attitude?

❖ What happened when you had a bad focus and attitude?

❖ How can you change from having a bad focus and attitude to a good focus and attitude?

Transformation

Look at the passage again in Romans 5:3-5: “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

The world is fallen. Therefore, we suffer. But God redeems suffering by making it a vehicle for transformation for us. Character transformation. He wants us to work those wimpy spiritual muscles so that we become strong in him. He wants to take our foolishness and give us wisdom. He wants to take our hardness of heart and soften it with compassion. He wants to transform our character.

And that is itself one of the reasons that we rejoice ... see what it says: we rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces good things! Not only is God present with me, giving me grace to see me through, but I can rejoice in my sufferings because I know that I will be stronger and better as a result of it. Nothing is lost. Nothing is wasted. Nothing is useless. God will use the worst times in my life to make me as strong as iron and as pure as gold. And that is a reason to rejoice!

Perseverance

Strong as iron. That’s what perseverance is about. The passage says clearly, “suffering produces perseverance.”

- ❖ Define perseverance.

In our humanity, suffering makes us want to quit. We want to get out. We want it to be over. *We* want to be over! But if we keep our focus and our attitude correct, we can stick it out when we're suffering: we can persevere.

- ❖ What parts of you get stronger when you persevere?

Character

Next, pure as gold. Character. Perseverance produces character, the passage says. Why is that so? Because when you persevere with a godly focus and attitude, you are developing those good virtues just discussed : things like patience, endurance, and will-power. But over the course of time, additional virtues are produced ... things that simply cannot happen without a long period of time, such as:

- ✓ *Steadfastness.* You build a solid core within you that cannot be shaken.
- ✓ *Trust.* When everything else is stripped away, you learn to lean on God.
- ✓ *Compassion.* When you suffer, you learn to identify with others who are suffering.
- ✓ *Wisdom.* You learn from your experiences as you persevere in them.

- ❖ What wisdom have you gained from suffering?

Hope

Finally, let's turn to hope. Suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope. Then, as it says in verse 5, "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us."

I find this interesting, because of all the things that suffering does, one thing stands out a bit: suffering causes despair. It sucks hope dry. With hope, people press on, they live, they adapt to change, they look to a brighter tomorrow. Without it, they curl up and die. And suffering tends to destroy our hope, whether that be the death of a spouse destroying your hope of a long happy marriage, being laid off destroying your hope of a good career, physical sickness destroying your hope of health and happiness, mental illness destroying your hope of peace and joy. Suffering by itself, in our humanity, destroys hope.

What a glorious thing, then, to realize that when we keep a godly focus and attitude, we can persevere in suffering and develop character ... and that our stronger, purer, godly character will give us back the hope the suffering takes from us.

And that makes sense, when we recall the virtues we just said came from perseverance: steadfastness, trust, compassion, and wisdom. In short, godliness. We come to know God better and become more like him.

❖ When we know God better and become like him, we can base our lives on the promises he gives us in Scripture. List some of the promises of Scripture.

But there's something else here that's very important to see ... the hope that we gain is not like the hope that we lost. We lose earthly hopes. Hopes that moth and rust and sin can destroy ... things like hopes for wealth or health or human relationships. We gain a hope that the verse says, "does not disappoint." We gain a heavenly hope. We gain something that nothing in this world can ever take away ... it cannot be lost through suffering, through death, through grief, through destruction ... it's a hope that does not disappoint.

Why? Because it's a hope founded on the person of God: "And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us." If I know that God loves me – and one of the ways I learn that is by persevering in trial, keeping my focus on him, and developing godly character – then nothing will shake my eternal hope for the future.

❖ Have you seen suffering give rise to eternal hope in your heart? What happened?

CONCLUSION

Suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance character, and character hope. This is one of the key ways we develop muscle in our spiritual walk. There are other methods, by the way ... the other main one being discipline: reading your Bible, praying, meditating, giving, serving, worshiping, etc.

Now, before we finish this lesson, it's important to ask a question: do we ever get beyond this stage? We're certainly weak when we start the Christian walk and need to develop muscle ... do we ever not need that anymore?

No, we never lose the need to develop muscle and keep up our strength. Ask any athlete ... if you don't use it, you lose it. So this isn't a temporary phase of life: we need to discipline ourselves our whole life, and we can expect that we will face various trials and sufferings our whole life. Let's face it: the world is fallen. We're fallen, though we've been redeemed. Until heaven, that isn't going to change.

But oh, let me leave you with these blessed words from Revelations 21:1-7:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

In the long scheme of things, suffering is temporary. It brings us a hope here and now that gives us strength and courage in the God who loves us ... but one day we shall see him face to face! No more suffering, no more trials, no more tears. That day we shall see our hope realized to the full, and find joy everlasting in the presence of God himself.



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 3: "I Want to Look Like That!"

Purity

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 3: “I Want to Look Like That!”

Purity

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we studied that salvation is ours by faith as a gift of God through his grace. It’s not as a result of works, or race, or enlightenment. It’s simply by faith. That’s the starting line in the Christian life.

We then discussed how we go about developing strength for the race ... and that one of the key ways we develop strength is when we face various trials. Romans 5:3-4 reads, “Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope.”

We looked at how suffering can produce strength of character when we learn to rejoice in the midst of it – when we keep our focus on God, and our attitude one of praise and thanksgiving to him. When we do that, we gain patience, steadfastness, trust, compassion, and wisdom ... to name just a few things. And we find that our lives become founded on hope – eternal hope, because we learn to trust in God with our whole heart.

A STANDARD OF PERFECTION

Now, let’s move on. Most of the time, when we’re involved in sports, we have a standard that we’re reaching toward. An ideal we’re trying to imitate.

- ❖ Name some of the current sports stars – from the Olympics or professional sports.

- ❖ What do you admire about these people?

It makes sense that in the race that we're running as Christians, we have an ideal that we're striving after, too. There are plenty of definitions of that ideal throughout Scripture, just as there are many football stars in the NFL. But all the definitions say basically the same thing, just as all the NFL stars demonstrate basically the same skills.

In this lesson, we're going to take a look at just one definition, and learn to apply it to our lives as a model – just as we might try to model ourselves in a sport after our single favorite hero.

That definition is found in Romans 12:1-2 ... an absolutely essential pair of verses to learn:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.

The image we see here is one of purity: purity of body, purity of mind, and purity of action.

A LIFE OF PURITY

Let's first take a look at purity. Probably the most basic definition of purity from Merriam-Webster for our purposes is this one: "**Free from moral fault or guilt.**" However, I find that definition kind of dry. It's absolutely true, but there's no life in the words.

Fortunately, Merriam-Webster had quite a bit more than that to say about purity. And those other definitions really put meat on the bones of the first definition. So let's look at some word pictures to help us understand what a pure life and soul looks like.

My life should be like gold.

First, my life should be like gold.

❖ What characterizes gold and why is it valuable?

In almost every culture, gold has been treasured. It has been used as money, formed into jewelry, and adorned buildings and furniture.

The key to gold's value is its purity: that it be "unmixed with any other matter" as the dictionary definition puts it. Gold mixed with anything else will cause it to tarnish and rust. Gold mixed with any other metal will lower its value.

Likewise, our lives should be like gold: unmixed with anything that is not of God. Two sub-definitions read, "Containing nothing that does not properly belong" and "Free from what weakens or pollutes." So also in our lives, we shouldn't have anything in us that does not properly belong, and we should be free of what weakens and pollutes us. We'll discuss in a moment what some of those things are.

We want our lives to be like gold. So remember: any time you put something in your life that doesn't belong, that is less than God, you are setting the stage for rust to set in and degrade the quality and value of your life. Instead, be as pure gold ... and when you do, your life will show others the treasure of heaven.

My life should be like bread.

Second, my life should be like bread. Imagined that I offered you a crusty loaf of French bread. Would you like to eat it? Sure! But what if I told you that I dropped the loaf in the parking lot this morning – would you still want it? Well, probably not. And what if I confessed that it had been sitting around for a few days too many, and it has a variety of nice, greenish-blue spots on it. Now do you want it?

Obviously, you don't want to eat bread that has been dropped on the ground and is covered with mold. It's not pure. Purity is defined as something "Free from dust, dirt, or taint." Something that is "spotless" or "stainless."

And that's what our lives should be like. We should be like good bread: fresh, crusty, no grit, no dirt, no germs, no mold. If we are like pure, fresh bread, we will be able to feed the world the bread of life.

My life should be like music.

Third, my life should be like music. One of the definitions of purity is "Free from harshness or roughness and being in tune – used of a musical tone."

❖ Imagine listening to a child learning to play the violin? Is it pleasant to hear? Why not?

❖ Now imagine listening to a professional orchestra? Is that pleasant to hear? Why?

What's the difference between the two? First and foremost, a professional orchestra – and each person in it – plays in tune. Each note is true and clear, so together they play in perfect harmony.

We want to be like one of those professional musicians ... each note of our lives in tune with God. The pure music of our lives will draw all those around us to the Divine Singer who gives us his own melody.

Purity:

- **No pollution:** like gold, we want to be a treasure of eternal value given to a spirit-impooverished world.
- **No dirt:** like bread, we want to feed the soul-hungry with the gospel.
- **No disharmony:** like music, we want to fill the world with the melody of God's eternal song of salvation.

Now, let's turn to look more closely at the three areas of purity noted in Romans 12:1-2.

PURITY OF BODY

First, purity of body.

This is found in Romans 12:1 ... "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship."

It's interesting that Paul begins with the body. I suspect one of the reasons he does so is because of the Greco-Roman culture he was living in. The culture at that time said that "matter is evil, spirit is good." This led to one of two main attitudes:

- "I will deny myself physical pleasures in order to attain spiritual enlightenment." These were the ascetics. They lived by strict dietary principles, among other rules, in order to subjugate and subdue the body.
- "I will treat myself to any physical pleasure I want, since the body doesn't matter." These were the hedonists, who gave themselves up to every physical pleasure they wanted, whether food or sex, or whatever.

Paul denies both of these attitudes. By telling his readers that they were to offer their bodies as a spiritual act of worship, he is reinstating the importance of and place of the body. He confirms that we are beings of both spirit and flesh – and both are good in God's sight.

This thought is also spoken of in I Corinthians 6:19-20: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body."

Because our body is good in God's sight, it is to be offered to him as a living sacrifice as part of how we worship him.

- ❖ Now, in the Old Testament, there's a lot of talk about sacrifices. What are some key points about whatever thing it is that you offer in sacrifice to God?

Since we are instructed to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice to God, it stands to reason that those same principles would hold true.

First, we should offer our bodies to him because our bodies are important and honorable. You don't offer junk to God. Unfortunately, many people do not consider their bodies in that light. In fact, many people actually hate their bodies.

- ❖ What are some reasons that people hate their bodies?

- ❖ What does God say about our bodies?

- ❖ How does the Incarnation of Jesus affect your understanding of your body?

- ❖ How would you go about changing your attitude if you have an incorrect perception of your own body?
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Second, we should offer our bodies to him in purity. Just as you wouldn't bring a lamb to the altar in the days of old that was sick or injured, so you should bring your body to him as a pure sacrifice.

Does that mean we can't come to him if we're sick or hurt? Of course not. Jesus welcomed all the sick and injured and diseased to come to him. What it does mean, I think, is two key things, both of which are talked about extensively in Scripture:

1. To offer our bodies to God in purity means that we should do things that keep us healthy. Much of the Jewish Law was centered around matters of health: What to eat and not to eat. Bathing. Cleansing. Not touching dead animals or people – and going through cleansing rituals if you had to do so.

All of this had spiritual significance, but it also was very practical and healthy. The rules can be summarized as follows:

- Do things that bring health.
- Don't do things that bring illness.

- ❖ So let's be practical. We want to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices – holy and pleasing to him. What things should we DO that encourage our good health?
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❖ Now, the opposite: what things should we AVOID that could bring illness?

2. Scripture also spends a great deal of time talking about sexual purity. Many of the verses I looked up on purity were in direct reference to sexual activity. Taking just one, let's return to I Corinthians 6 .. verse 18 reads, "Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a man commits are outside his body, but he who sins sexually sins against his own body."

If you recall the first lesson, we pointed out that when we turn away from God, one of the first things to go is our sexual purity. Understandable, then, that so many verses have to do with regaining and retaining our sexual purity as Christians.

In the interest of time, we won't go into the issue of sexual purity in depth today, especially as there is a great body of material dealing with it in the library, on the radio, and in various seminars. The bottom line is this: we are called to chastity until marriage, and fidelity until death. And within the bonds of marriage, we are to respect and honor our marriage partner.

❖ What does the world teach us about sex and sexuality?

❖ Have you allowed the world's philosophy to negatively impact your approach toward sex and sexuality? If so, what can you do to regain a true and right attitude?

So to summarize this section: God calls us to present our bodies to him as living sacrifices. That means that we should have a right attitude toward our bodies, holding them as important and good. And because they are good, we should keep ourselves pure in body: doing things that

promote good health, avoiding things that could lead to illness, and paying particular attention to keeping ourselves sexually pure.

PURITY OF MIND

Next, purity of mind. This is addressed in Romans 12:2, “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Let’s take a look first at “the pattern of this world.” After all, to avoid falling into a pit, it very much helps to know where that pit is and how it is disguised.

❖ How would you define “the pattern of this world?”

My favorite concise definition is found in I John 2:16, “For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.” (NAS)

The lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. Three aspects of the pattern of the world.

❖ What are the lusts of the flesh?

❖ What are the lusts of the eyes?

❖ What is the boastful pride of life?

These are all the things that we should stay away from. They are how the world patterns itself ... running after all these things. Let's take the reverse, then, to help us see the heavenly pattern we should be conforming ourselves to.

❖ What virtues stand opposite to the lusts of the flesh?

❖ What virtues stand opposite to the lusts of the eyes?

❖ What virtues stand opposite to the boastful pride of life?

This, then, is the scenario ... the world has a pattern that we are not to conform to any longer. Instead, we are to become transformed in the renewing of our mind so that we become self-disciplined, generous, humble people, displaying the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. How does this happen?

First, we need to pray that God would transform us. Remember: we are looking to embody the fruits of the Spirit, and the attitude of Christ. We're not going to do that apart from the Spirit and Christ. Therefore, we need to pray that God would do a transforming work within us.

Second, however, we need to act. God can't do much if we're not giving it our best shot as well. That involves doing good things: reading Scripture, spending time with Christian friends, praising and worshiping God. And it also means not doing bad things: watching immoral movies and TV programs, reading inappropriate books and magazines, listening to music that contradicts God's values.

You might think of it this way: before you were a Christian, you were bound by chains that were loaded down with heavy iron weights. When you became a Christian, you were given the key to every lock on every chain ... but you do have to choose to unlock them and put them aside.

Suppose you joyfully get rid of 9 out of the 10 chains that weighed you down. You feel great! So much lighter! But as you run in the race, you find that you're always dragging, getting tired and worn out so quickly.

Is it any wonder why? No Olympian is going to run a marathon with a thirty pound weight attached to his foot. Neither can you. That's what sin does to us. We may have gotten rid of 90% of the sins that weigh us down – but as long as we don't get rid of the remaining ones, we're not going to be able to run the race to the best of our ability.

We need to be transformed in the renewing of our mind. And to be renewed, we have to get rid of the old dead sins that are dragging at us. All of them. Be ruthless with the sin in your life: get rid of it. Don't pollute your mind with movies that are full of sex and violence. Don't think that "a little pornography won't hurt." Don't pretend that workaholicism won't destroy your relationships. Don't assume that a small dark closet full of sin won't infect the rest of your life.

Be renewed. Get in the Word, and get in prayer. Do what you need to do to get rid of sin, and know that God will take care of the rest – and then you'll be able to run the race without any weights dragging you down.

PURITY OF ACTION

Finally, we move on to purity of action. This is also found in Romans 12:2, "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will."

If we honor God with our bodies and are transformed in our minds, we will find that something else happens as well ... we become pure in our actions. What we do is a natural outpouring of who we are in our mind and heart.

There are two aspects of purity of action: knowing God's will, and doing it.

First, knowing God's will. Paul writes, "Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is."

How do we know what God's will is? The top five ways we know God's will are through the Scriptures, by using our reason, through the counsel of godly individuals, by analyzing our circumstances, and through the Spirit within our hearts.

Usually, God will reveal his will to us using several of those top five ways – so that we receive multiple confirmations of what his will is for us.

But second, after we know God's will, we are called to do it. Knowing isn't enough. In James 4:17 it says, "Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins."

❖ What stops us from doing God's will?

If you don't know God's will, or if you are having trouble doing it, pray to be renewed and transformed, and seek to weed out the sin in your life. Knowing and doing God's will follow spiritual transformation – we can't expect good fruit if the branch itself is sick or rotten.

CONCLUSION

Purity. Two little verses that pack quite a lot of punch. We are called to be pure as gold, an offering fit to present to God as a sacrifice. We are to treat our bodies with respect and honor. We are to turn away from the pattern of this world, and be transformed by the Spirit of God in our very minds. Then – and only then – we will be able to test and approve God's will – his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

Don't be afraid of what you will become when you offer yourself as a living sacrifice to God. Yes, it will be hard for old attitudes and actions to be stripped away. It may hurt. But he is the God who loves us, and he acts only for our good.

Let me close with this. When a silversmith refines silver, he heats it very, very hot. The dross – that is, the impurities, rise to the surface and he skims them away, then lets the silver cool again. And again, he heats it until more dross rises and can be skimmed off. And again it cools. Seven times he does this ... until at the end, the silver is pure and refined. And he knows this, because pure silver perfectly reflects the Master's face.

So let it be for us.



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 4: Gatorade Isn't Enough *Overcoming Sin*

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 4: Gatorade isn't Enough

Overcoming Sin

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we studied Romans 12:1-2, and looked at how these two verses can be a model for us of how to run the race called the life in Christ. The verses deal with purity: purity of body, purity of mind, and purity of action.

When we look at purity of body, we are reminded that we are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God – that is part of our spiritual worship. That means that we should treat our bodies as important and honorable, and do things to keep ourselves healthy and sexually pure.

Purity of mind is achieved when we turn away from the pattern of this world: the lusts of the flesh, the lusts of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life (I John 2:16). Instead, we should be a transformed people: a people characterized by self-discipline, servanthood, and humility.

Finally, purity of action takes place when we learn to recognize and know God's will, and do it with our whole heart.

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH: THE STRUGGLE AGAINST SIN

Today, we're going to look at Romans 7 and 8 ... a lot of material is packed in here that is incredibly relevant for us.

First, Romans 7. Romans 7 takes a look at "When the going gets tough." It's Paul's very personal look at his struggle against sin – a struggle we all share, even after we are redeemed and saved by Jesus.

Paul uses some very strong language when he talks about sin. In verse 5, he says we were "controlled by the sinful nature." In verse 6, he says we had to die to what once "bound" us. Verse 8 says that sin "seized the opportunity" to "produce in me every kind of covetous desire." Verse 11 says that sin "deceived me" and "put me to death." And verse 14 states that Paul was "sold as a slave to sin."

This is very clear ... Paul views sin as a powerful, controlling force in his life, leading him to death.

- ❖ What are some of the views of sin that people have – both inside and outside of the church – today?

- ❖ What does it mean to say that man is totally corrupt apart from salvation through Christ?

- ❖ How would you explain that belief to a non-believer who felt that man was basically good, or at least innocent when born?

You see, this is the foundation for Paul’s understanding of sin: we are responsible for doing evil, and yet (apart from Christ) the evil impulse within us is so strong that it is itself a controlling factor. As someone has said, we sin because we are sinners, and we are sinners because we sin. Both are equally true.

Let’s return for a minutes to a few of the phrases Paul uses to describe the force of sin in his life. Paul states that naturally we are “controlled by the sinful nature.” Look back for a minute to your life before you know Christ:

❖ Did you ever feel “controlled” or “enslaved” by sin? How? Why? What happened?

❖ Can you give an example of sin “seizing an opportunity” in your life that resulted in you sinning?

❖ How did sin “deceive” you?

Unfortunately, the force of sin doesn’t disappear when we become Christians. Paul goes on in Romans 7 to apparently describe the continuing struggle he had with sin. (At least, that is one way to interpret these verses.)

He writes in verse 15 and following, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”

Put briefly, Paul is saying, “I want to follow God, but I keep on sinning! What can I do!?”

- ❖ When in your life have you experienced this same cry of despair? What happened?

I think we have all felt this way at various times. We love God, we've been saved and redeemed by him, many of our habitual sins have fallen away from us, but we still have some old sins that keep hanging on. Perhaps the desire for gossip ... we just love a good, catty little chat. Perhaps greed ... we hide it under wanting to have more to give to God, but really it's because we want it ourselves. Perhaps lust ... we don't actually have affairs, but we sneak a peak at a porn site on the internet every now and then. Perhaps bitterness ... we just can't give up on that old grudge, so we nurse it every chance we get.

- ❖ What sins do you struggle with the most?

When we take a good, honest look at ourselves, we see these things. We may try to fight against them and overcome them. Perhaps we've tried for years, and failed more times than we can count. And so eventually, with Paul, we cry out, "What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

GATORADE ISN'T ENOUGH: THE POWER OF THE SPIRIT

Thank the Lord, Romans 8 follows Romans 7! Because it is in Romans 8 that we find the answer. The phrase usually goes, "When the going gets tough, the tough get going." But that isn't the case here. We aren't tough enough to conquer sin by ourselves. Gatorade isn't enough to overcome this weakness in our souls. The only thing that can get us through and give us the victory is the power of the Spirit.

It's good to remember that in the Greek, the word "power" is "dunamis" ... the same word from which we get "dynamite." So in all we talk about today, I want you to remember that God gives you the power to blow up the strongholds of sin in your life. We're not talking about a wimpy victory here ... God doesn't "get by by the skin of his teeth." The end is not in doubt. In fact,

Romans 8 talks about nine sticks of dynamite that God gives us to explode the hold of the devil in our lives.

The Power of Truth

The first stick of dynamite we have is the power of the truth. This is where we begin. Romans 8:1-4 reads, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.”

We’ve already discussed the all-sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for us in an earlier lesson. I won’t repeat it again here. What I do want to focus on, however, is that these words are a creed for us ... a shield to guard us against the fiery darts of the devil.

Part of the power of sin is the power to deceive and the power to wear us down. Sin whispers to us, “You’re no good ... you’ve fallen so many times before ... you can’t win ... why bother even trying? You’ll only fail again ... God can’t love you ... he won’t help you – he’s probably disgusted by you ... you’re just a failure to him ...” But in these verses, we find our answer to these lies:

- I am forgiven in Christ. (verse 1)
- I am free in Christ. (verse 2)
- I am alive in Christ. (verse 4)

These are three strong words ... forgiven, free, alive. Whenever sin rears its ugly head and you feel condemned, state clearly that “I am forgiven in Christ.” When sin tells you that you can’t be good, declare, “I am free in Christ.” When sin whispers that you are a failure, shout, “I am alive in Christ!”

Say it with me:

- *I am forgiven in Christ.*
- *I am free in Christ.*
- *I am alive in Christ.*

- ❖ Consider the sins you named in the earlier question. How does the fact that you are forgiven, free, and alive in Christ impact your struggle with these sins?
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The importance of a creed like this – of memorizing verses like this – is because when Satan is battering us down, we get depressed and worn out. That means our feelings are all jumbled and unreliable. I repeat: our feelings are unreliable. Again and again we forget that, and we think, “God *seems* so far away ... God *can't* care about me ... God *doesn't* care about me ... I *can't* get victory over this ... I *am* a failure ...” and we believe and act on those lies.

The Scripture is there to remind us of the TRUTH. God is near. He *does* care. He *is* love. You *can* have victory. You *can* live an abundant life in him.

In the battle against sin, we have to master our feelings and believe and act on the truth. And that is done through the Scripture. Those aren't just words you're saying to pep yourself up – this is the voice of Almighty God, refuting the lies of the devil.

- ❖ Give an example of a time when the truth of Scripture protected you from sinning.
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You might say, “I know all those things, but it doesn't make a difference.” You know them, but do you believe them? And don't say you can't believe them ... you can. It's your choice to live in the truth, or to live in a lie.

This hit me very hard when I read the following from the novel *The Last Sin Eater* by Francine Rivers. The conversation takes place between a very frightened young girl, Katrina Anice, and another little girl named Lilybet. Though Katrina doesn't know it, Lilybet is an angel. Lilybet begins:

*"The truth has set you free, beloved. Now you must choose to walk in it."
"Easy for you to say, but what of the Kai? Is he going to let us walk anywhere at all now he knows we went against him?"
"Believe on him who saved you, Katrina Anice."*

"I want to believe. I do."

"Then believe."

"I try to believe."

"Believe. Set your mind and heart upon Christ and obey the word of the Lord. Stand firm, Katrina Anice. God himself is going to fight for you."

So when sin attacks, believe and stand firm in the power of the Truth. God himself will fight for you.

The Power of Transformation

The second stick of dynamite we have is the power of transformation. Verses 5 and 6 read, "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace."

We talked about transformation in our discussion on purity of mind. When you set yourself to no longer conforming to the pattern of this world, but to being transformed in the renewing of your mind, you will experience power over sin.

Think about it:

- If you set your mind on chastity, what place will lust have?
- If you set your mind on humility, what place will pride have?
- If you set your mind on generosity, what place will greed have?
- If you set your mind on love, what place will selfishness have?

This is a choice. We can choose what we put into our minds. We can choose what to think about. We can choose what to dwell on.

❖ What are you putting into your mind? What do you choose to think about? To dwell on?

Will transformation be easy? No, not necessarily. But when we give it 100%, the Spirit will carry us the rest of the way. He will make the transformation happen in the very depth of our being, until someday it becomes who we are – because we become like him.

The Power of Obedience

The third stick of dynamite is the power of obedience. This is found in verses 7-9: “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you.”

We're very big about control in our culture ... namely, that we want to be in control of our lives. Master of our fate. Captain of the ship. But true power comes from handing over that control to God.

Being obedient isn't possible unless we foster three key attitudes in our life: humility, trust, and love.

First, humility. Obedience is about submission. It's about admitting that I don't know what's best for myself.

Second, trust. Once I've admitted that I don't know what's best for myself, the next step is to believe and acknowledge that God does know what's best for me.

Third, love. After I've recognized that God knows what's best for me, I choose to follow his guidance because I love him.

It's interesting to think of obedience as a powerful position. Typically, we think of it in terms of subordination or even as inferiority. Slaves obey. Servants obey. Employees obey. But God says that obedience is the key to victory and power over sin. And that is because we are obeying the one who has a divine strategy for winning – and who has the power to back it up.

Perhaps if we thought of obedience in military terms, it could help. If each soldier did his own thing and what he thought was best, the battlefield would be chaotic. Ammunition would be spent uselessly. Soldiers would be out-flanked. Dangers that would be apparent from a higher vantage point would be walked into blindly. They would lose their lives and the war.

However, if each soldier in the army obeys his commanding officer, the army will win as long as the commander knows what is best to do and has the firepower to rout the enemy. And that is what our Commander has – knowledge and power. In that context, obedience makes perfect sense if we want to win. Obedience puts us in a position of power over the enemy.

❖ When is obedience difficult for you?

- ❖ When is obedience easy?
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The Power of the Spirit

The fourth stick of dynamite is the power of the Spirit. This is found in verses 12 and 13: “Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.”

You might think, “Wait, you say I can’t get power over sin until I stop sinning? Isn’t that a circular argument? If I could stop, I would!”

The reason this is not a circular argument is because of that little phrase in verse 13: “by the Spirit.” You can’t do this on your own. You can only do it “by the Spirit.”

You certainly have a part in it ... the Spirit can’t stop you from drinking if you’re always sitting down with a beer in your hand. But if you choose to not buy the beer on your way home, he can strengthen your resolve and then also help you resist the temptation to go out and get some later.

It’s important here to remember that the Spirit is a Person. Not an impersonal “force.” Not an “it.” Not a wispy breeze on the wind. He moved over the face of the waters in the creation. He is described as Wisdom crying in the streets. He brought about the conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb. He raised Jesus from the dead. The Holy Spirit is a Person, and is a Person with infinite power, just as the Father and the Son are omnipotent. Because he is omnipotent, he can give you the power you need to overcome sin in your life.

- ❖ What word-picture can you use to better understand the Spirit’s role and presence in your life?
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The Power of Guidance

The fifth stick of dynamite is the power of guidance. Verse 14 says simply, “because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.”

One of the powerful things the Spirit does for us is guide us. Think about some of the terms we use ... “Before I knew Christ, I was lost.” “Even though I’m a Christian, I still lose my way sometimes.” “I don’t know how I got into that situation.”

Lost. Sin confuses us. It leads us down a path of destruction. It makes us lose our head, and derails our sense of direction. But it doesn’t have to be that way when we are in Christ: we don’t have to lose our way, because the Spirit is there to guide us. He can keep us from going off the narrow way.

❖ How does the Spirit guide us? How do we recognize his voice?

The Power of Adoption

The sixth stick of dynamite is the power of adoption. Verses 15 and 16 read, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.”

Part of the power of sin is its power to tear down our self-esteem. Sin tells us that we’re a nobody. We don’t belong. We are alone and there’s no one to help us. The power of adoption is the power to stand against each one of those lies.

We are somebody to God ... Jesus didn’t die for nobodies. The fact that the eternal, almighty, all-sufficient God loved you enough to die for you proves your worth. And beyond that, we are adopted as sons and daughters of the Most High. He didn’t save us and leave us out in the cold. He saved us and adopted us.

That makes us princes and princesses in the Kingdom of God – for Jesus Christ is King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Not only are we each somebody special, but we belong. That’s what a family – in its ideal – is all about. It’s a place of belonging. It’s a place to feel safe and secure, no matter what you’ve done, or how you’ve blown it, or what kind of a lousy day you’ve had. So when Satan tells you that

you can't go home again, throw the lie back in his face. You're part of the family of God. You've got a Daddy who loves you and will never turn you away.

And finally, we are not alone. That is also what it means to be part of God's family, adopted as his child. Not only are we somebody special, not only can we run home to God when the cares of the world burden us down, but, in fact, God goes with us out into that world. Your family members go with you. When you were a child, your mom or dad would take you everywhere you wanted to go. They were there to protect you, lead you, guide you, and provide for you. So it is with God: we are his children, and he's never going to let us out of his sight.

❖ What is the best part of being in a family to you?

The Power of Hope

The seventh stick of dynamite is the power of hope. Verse 17 reads, "Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

Sin eats away at us with the sickness of despair. "You can't overcome this. There's no way out. You're always going to be like this. You're going to live with the consequences of this forever."

Hope destroys despair. We can press on – and even rejoice – because there is an end. There's an end to sin and all its power. There's an end to suffering. There's an end to all our fallen nature. We are going to share in the glory of God as co-heirs with Christ. And that is a glorious hope.

❖ What are you most looking forward to in heaven?

The Power of Prayer

The eighth stick of dynamite is the power of prayer. Verses 26-27 read, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.”

If you're like me, you have often felt that your prayers were faltering and weak at best, totally inadequate to even express the depth of your needs. But these verses aren't talking about our weak and human prayers. These verses are talking about the Holy Spirit himself interceding for us.

No one knows better how to pray for us. No one knows better what we need. And we can know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God the Father hears and answers the prayers of his own Spirit.

Don't ask me to explain how the Trinity works here ... I haven't a clue, but I know it's true: God himself is interceding for you and me – every day, every hour, every minute. And his prayers are powerful to save us from sin.

❖ What does it mean to you to realize that God himself is interceding on your behalf?

The Power of Love

Last, but certainly not least, the ninth stick of dynamite is the power of love. Verses 35 and following read, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

❖ Have you ever been afraid that something could separate you from God? What was it?

When I sin, I feel very unlovely and unlovable. And sometimes I sin *because* I feel unlovely or unlovable. It's a nasty cycle that leads to despair and defeat.

But chapter 8 ends with the best news of all: nothing can separate us from the love of God. No matter how bad I've been, he loves me. No matter how many times I've failed in exactly the same way, he loves me. No matter if I am rebelliously doing my thing, he loves me. How could I fail to love him in return? And because I love him, I will try to make him happy by obeying him.

Nothing can separate us from his love. Your drugs aren't so big that they can stand between you and the love of God. Your drink can't. Your anger can't. Your gossiping can't. Your addictions can't. Your lack of self-control can't. God's love is bigger and stronger and more enveloping than any of these things.

So when some sin looms large in your eyes and seems to blot out everything else and calls to you with its seductive or condemning voice ... remind yourself: God loves me. And because he loves me, he'll give me the power to overcome this. I can do it – in him. I don't have to sin anymore. I am forgiven. I am free. I am alive. I am in Christ and in his love – and nothing can take that away from me, or me away from him.

CONCLUSION

Nine sticks of dynamite. The power of God has been given to us to overcome sin. Truth. Transformation. Obedience. The Spirit. Guidance. Adoption. Hope. Prayer. Love.

There's something that all of these sticks of dynamite have in common: they aren't about what we can do or accomplish on our own. They are all the power of God working in our lives. You can't control sin. You can't beat it on your own. You can't have victory over it by yourself. But God can. And God will. When you do your part, he'll do his part. He's given you the dynamite to blow sin right out of your life. It's up to you to light the fuse.



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 5: Accepting Your Teammates

Differences in the Body of Christ

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 5: Accepting Your Teammates

Differences in the Body of Christ

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we studied Romans 8, and looked at how God has given us the power we need to overcome sin in our lives. There were nine sticks of dynamite – nine different kinds of power – that God is willing to pour out in our lives:

- The power of truth to combat the lies of the devil.
- The power of transformation to renew your mind.
- The power of obedience to live out God's laws.
- The power of the Spirit to live in us.
- The power of guidance to walk in God's will.
- The power of adoption to make us God's children.
- The power of hope to conquer despair.
- The power of prayer to effectively intercede for us.
- The power of love to make us safe and secure.

GRAY MATTERS

In this lesson, we're going to look at the challenging area of differences in the body of Christ. Not the fun differences of spiritual gifts and talents, but the difficult differences of belief and action. And we're going to learn what God has to say about accepting our teammates in this race of life.

The first thing to establish is that God states clearly that there are gray matters in the church.

Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters. One man's faith allows him to eat everything, but another man, whose faith is weak, eats only vegetables. The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does, for God has accepted him. Who are you to judge someone else's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One man considers one day more sacred than another; another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God. For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. (Romans 14:1-8)

Here, we see two gray matters that were evidently causing some ruckus in the early church: vegetarianism and the custom of observing certain special days. From what Paul says, we can gather that this was causing some division and nose-in-the-air attitudes. We'll get to that aspect in a minute. First, let's look more closely at gray matters.

For a working definition, a gray matter is a belief or action that 1) is not stated conclusively to be right or wrong in the Bible, 2) may be disagreed upon within the orthodox church and, 3) has an impact on a person's spiritual state.

Let's take that apart bit by bit:

First, a gray matter is not stated conclusively to be right or wrong in the Bible. This is key, because we are never to tolerate sin in the church or in our individual lives.

❖ How do we know is something is a sin?

Gray matters don't fall into this category. There are no specific verses that a person can point to that incontrovertibly state "this action or belief is a sin" or "this action or belief is absolute for everyone." You'll notice that I said "conclusively" and "incontrovertibly." That is because the matter of interpretation will come up in our next point.

Second, a gray matter may be disagreed upon in the orthodox church. I put in the phrase "in the orthodox church" because there are churches and people who claim to be Christian who espouse un-Biblical beliefs. For instance, the current issue of ordaining practicing homosexuals. The Biblical view is clear: homosexuality is an abomination before God, and the practice of it can in no way be condoned in the church. So the fact that some churches do ordain homosexuals into ministry does not make this a gray matter: it simply means that some churches are sinning.

Rather, a gray matter, again, means that there aren't specific verses forbidding or commanding the certain belief or action, but people have historically disagreed on it.

❖ What are some examples of gray matters in the church today?

So if there aren't verses forbidding or requiring a certain belief or action, why would people disagree – sometimes strongly – over it? There are several reasons:

1. The belief or action may be contrary to **tradition**. If you have always sung hymns, singing contemporary worship songs may seem “wrong,” and may cause division in the church.
2. The belief or action may be based on **interpretation**. This is why we stated before that gray matters are not things that are stated conclusively to be sins in the Bible. Sins are sins. Gray matters, however, may be argued reasonably from Scripture both ways. For instance, positions for and against pacifism can be supported by good, logical Scriptural interpretation.
3. The belief or action may be based on **experience**. For example, having one glass of wine with dinner may be a non-issue for one person because they are not tempted to drunkenness, but another person may find that one drink always leads to becoming drunk.
4. The belief or action may be based on **maturity**. Paul points this reason out himself in Romans 14: he refers to a brother being “weak in faith,” therefore thinking he can eat “only eat vegetables.” The weaker brother may not realize that Christ has freed him to eat all things.

Third, a gray matter has an impact on a person's spiritual state. This part of the definition is to point out that gray matters are not about inconsequential opinions like preferring blue over purple, or over what Bible translation to use. No, gray matters have an impact on a person's spirit. If you sing contemporary worship songs and I like hymns, I may not be able to worship well in your church. If there's a military draft and your name comes up and you're a pacifist and also patriotic, you will have to make a hard decision to disobey your country's call to action. If you think you have to observe Lent and others tell you it's not necessary and you listen to them, you may feel self-reproach or self-condemnation.

Gray matters. The Bible calls them in these verses, “disputable matters.” They can be disputed. They can be argued about. They aren't quite clear. But they matter to people very much.

PASSING JUDGMENT

Because gray matters are about issues that do matter to people, they can cause problems and friction among believers. Paul writes in verse 3, “The man who eats everything must not look down on him who does not, and the man who does not eat everything must not condemn the man who does.”

“Looking down” on someone. “Condemning” someone. That’s what gray matters can do in the church if we’re not careful. Instead, Paul writes in verses 9 through 13: “For this very reason, Christ died and returned to life so that he might be the Lord of both the dead and the living. You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God’s judgment seat. It is written: “As surely as I live,’ says the Lord, ‘every knee will bow before me; every tongue will confess to God.” So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God. Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another.”

Judgment is a very sticky point, so let’s talk about it for a minute.

❖ Is it ever appropriate to judge another’s actions? Why or why not?

It’s important to remember that there are two kinds of judgment talked about in the Bible. One we are directed to practice, and one we are forbidden to practice.

For the first, we are to exercise judgment when judgment is defined as **discernment**. We see this demonstrated in the following passages:

- I Corinthians 5:1-5 ... “It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: A man has his father’s wife. And you are proud! Shouldn’t you rather have been filled with grief and have put out of your fellowship the man who did this? Even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. And I have already passed judgment on the one who did this, just as if I were present. When you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, hand this man over to Satan, so that the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord.”
- I Corinthians 5:12 ... “What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? God will judge those outside. ‘Expel the wicked man from among you.’”

- Peter judged Ananias and Sapphira when they lied about the money they had received for the sale of their property.
- Romans 12:9 ... “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”
- I Thessalonians 5:21-22 ... “Test everything. Hold on to the good. Avoid every kind of evil.”

We see in the above passages that we are called to know what sin is so that we can avoid it ourselves and confront it in the church.

However, we are forbidden to judge when judgment is defined as **condemnation**:

- Luke 6:37 ... “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven.”
- Romans 14:1,10 ... Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother?”

These passages show that we are not to be condemning, patronizing, or condescending in our attitudes toward our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Now let’s turn to passing judgment as it is referred to in Romans 14. Actually, both kinds of judgment are referred to here, summed up in verse 1: “Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters.”

The one kind of judgment – the forbidden kind – is noted obviously here: “Don’t condemn your brother about disputable matters!” But the other is also inferred: we have to make sure it is a disputable matter – a gray matter – that we’re talking about. Why? Because sin always should be addressed.

So when you find you disagree with someone, ask yourself: Is this a disputable matter? Or is this sin? Can I prove it from the Bible one way or the other? If it is sin, what do I need to do about it? If it is a disputable matter ... **let it go**.

Let it go. Three very hard words. Don’t condemn your brother or sister. Don’t look down your nose at them. But neither should you try to convince them of your point of view. Verse 4 says, “To his own master he stands or falls. And he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” It’s not your business. His position on disputable matters is between him and God. Verses 5 and 6 continue the thought: “Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. He who regards one day as special, does so to the Lord. He who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.” And verse 22 says simply, “So whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God.”

Let it go. It's not your business. If someone disagrees with you about a disputable matter, let them do their thing and glorify God in their belief or action. He knows their heart and their reasons. If they ask your opinion, feel free to give it, but don't work at convincing them and don't present your opinion as law. If it's a gray matter, it's a gray matter ... not black and white. Your opinion is just that: an opinion about a disputable matter.

Given all the problems that can result from gray matters – judgment, division, friction, confusion – why did God allow there to be gray matters at all? Why didn't he just spell it all out for us?

The reason is because gray matters help us develop some very Christ-like characteristics. First, they help us develop **discernment**. As we said earlier, we have to figure out if the thing we differ on is a gray matter, or an absolute.

Second, they help us develop **humility**. Our ego always demands that everyone admit that we're right. Completely. All the time. But gray matters help us develop humility because we have to admit that there are differing views about a matter, and that's okay, and we don't have to demand our own viewpoint on the issue.

Third, they help us develop **love**. Because not only do we not demand that people accept our view on a matter, but we actually have to look out for and respect the other person's differing viewpoint in some very concrete ways. And that leads us to the matter of stumbling blocks.

STUMBLING BLOCKS

After Paul reminds his readers that they are not to pass judgment on their fellow believers about disputable matters, he goes one step further: he commands them to avoid putting a stumbling block in their brother or sister's way.

We find this passage beginning in Romans 14:13:

Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in your brother's way. As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died. Do not allow what you consider good to be spoken of as evil Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification. Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a man to eat anything that causes someone else to stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to do anything else that will cause your brother to fall.

What does it mean to put a stumbling block in someone's way? Simply put, it means doing something that upsets the spiritual walk of your brother or sister in Christ. Maybe just offending their scruples. Maybe tempting them to sin. Maybe leading them to actually sin.

There is a parallel passage in I Corinthians 8 that gives a second example of this principle. Here are excerpts from it:

Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one ... But not everyone knows this. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat such food they think of it as having been sacrificed to an idol, and since their conscience is weak, it is defiled. But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

Be careful, however, that the exercise of your freedom does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone with a weak conscience sees you who have this knowledge eating in an idol's temple, won't he be emboldened to eat what has been sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against your brothers in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to fall.

There are several things going on here: As we said earlier, first, we have to recognize that we have a difference of opinion with another person. Second, we have to discern whether or not that difference of opinion concerns a sinful action or belief, or a gray matter. If it's a gray matter, we don't try to go convincing the other person about our opinion. But we do have to examine our own actions to see if we need to modify our behavior in light of what the other person believes.

This is a really hard thing. Not only is it hard to let a matter go and let the other person have their own opinion ... because, let's face it, we always want people to think and act just like us, and we feel that we have to convince everyone around us of the rightness of our beliefs and actions. That's just human nature. But not only do we have to shut our mouths, we have to modify our own actions out of care and respect and love for the other person!

Again, let's face it: if we disagree with someone, we want them to change their beliefs and actions to match ours! Not the other way around! But Paul says simply in I Corinthians 8, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." We are to build one another up. Not puff ourselves up.

Now, you might have a couple of questions here ... the top two being: If I differ about a gray matter with someone, which one of us is supposed to modify his or her behavior? And, If I modify my behavior out of respect for someone else's opinion, aren't I being dishonest or hypocritical?

Let's take these one at a time: If I differ about a gray matter with someone, which one of us is supposed to modify his or her behavior?

Paul says that whoever is the stronger should defer to the opinion of the weaker. That may sometimes be hard to tell, especially on very sticky issues. Often both people may think they're

the “stronger”! So perhaps it is easier to follow the other principle in the passages: *if acting in a certain way or saying certain things could lead the other person into temptation and sin, you should modify what you say and how you act.*

Here are two examples:

- ❖ First, suppose you find out that a new friend is a vegetarian for philosophical reasons. You aren't. But she's very strong in her faith and has told you that she doesn't mind if you eat meat when you go to a restaurant together. Should you order your favorite chicken dish or not?
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- ❖ Here's a second example. You don't have any moral issue with having a glass of wine with dinner. But a friend comes over for dinner who is a recovering alcoholic. What should you do?
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Now, let's move on to the other question: If I modify my behavior out of respect for someone else's opinion, aren't I being dishonest or hypocritical?

You are not being dishonest or hypocritical unless you lie and claim that you don't hold the opinion that you do, in fact, have. For instance, if you invite your friend over who is a recovering alcoholic and he asks you if you ever drink and you say “No, I never do,” then you are being dishonest and a hypocrite. If asked directly, give your opinion simply and clearly, but communicate that you respect your friend's opinion and needs. For instance, you could say, “Yes, I do have an occasional glass of wine, but never more than one so that I never get drunk. However, I know you've had issues with alcohol in the past, so I would never put stress on you by having a drink if you were nearby. I care about you too much to treat you badly like that.”

Again, remember that your goal is not to convince someone else that your view is the right one to hold. Just state your opinion and move on. You want to show respect and love for your brother or sister in Christ.

BECOMING ONE

What's the goal of it all? The goal is stated in the first few verses of Romans 15: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

What's the goal? Why do we want to respect each other's opinions when it comes to disputable matters? Why do we want to avoid putting a stumbling block in a brother's or sister's way? Why do we work so hard to build one another up? So that we might have "a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus." That's what it's all about here. This whole passage doesn't have to do primarily with pointing out what's different between us ... it's whole purpose is to point out that the differences don't matter. We should be one in Christ. We should not allow any gray matters to come between us or to cause division or friction or contempt or disagreement.

If we truly obey the commands of Romans 14 and accept one another and work to build one another up, we will become one in Christ as we were meant to be.

CONCLUSION

So I challenge you with this in closing: look carefully at the beliefs you hold. Which ones are absolute truth, doctrine as stated in the Bible? Hold fast to those and never let them go. Never give an inch on them and on proclaiming them to be the truth.

Which ones are your personal opinions about gray matters? I know they matter to you. I know they have a spiritual impact on your life. That is not in question. But if they are gray matters, learn to respect the opinions of those who might hold the opposite point of view.

And when you interact with people who do hold a different point of view, decide now: How will you act? Will you need to modify your behavior out of love for the other person? What will you say? What will you not say? As with so many things in life, an ounce of preparation is worth a pound of cure. Our goal is unity in the Spirit. That's a glorious goal. Isn't it worth spending time preparing for?



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 6: Team Spirit

Love

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 6: Team Spirit

Love

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we studied Romans 14, and the topic of gray matters. We reviewed that a gray matter, or a disputable matter, is a belief or action that 1) is not stated conclusively to be right or wrong in the Bible, 2) may be disagreed upon in the orthodox church and, 3) has an impact on a person's spiritual state.

We learned that we are not to pass judgment on people because they disagree with us about gray matters. Instead, we need to be very careful to respect one another, make sure we don't put a stumbling block in someone's way, and build one another up. When we do so, we will gain unity in the body of Christ.

TEAM SPIRIT: LOVE

Today, we're going to look at what Romans has to say about team spirit. That is found in Romans 12. And the team spirit we should have, is love.

In Romans 12, there are seven aspects of love that we want to focus on today. There are plenty other aspects of love – like those listed in I Corinthians 13 – such that you could engage in an entire study on love alone. But in this lesson, we're going to look at seven specifics found in Romans 12.

Sincerity

The first aspect of love is *sincerity*. We see in verse 9, that "Love must be sincere."

❖ What does it mean to be sincere?

- ❖ Now comes the hard question ... do we love with sincerity in the church? Explain your answer.
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We certainly preach love in the church. I'm sure of that. I'm equally sure that many non-churched folk accuse church folk of being hypocrites ... so something isn't connecting somewhere, and chances are it has something to do with love and not walking the talk.

It's easy to point the finger elsewhere. It's harder to look in the mirror. But let's do it anyway. Consider the following questions; you get a point for each time you answer "Yes":

1. Did you ever say, "I'll pray for you" then didn't?
2. Did you ever resent someone else's success or prosperity or blessing?
3. Did you ever say, "We must get together sometime!" and be glad it never happened?
4. Were you ever in a situation where you should have confronted sin, and didn't?
5. Did you ever avoid saying hello to a new person in the church?
6. Did you ever gossip about people in the church ... or outside of it?
7. Did you ever say, "How are you?" and not listen for the answer?
8. Have you ever been too proud to say, "I'm sorry"?
9. Did you ever refuse to give when you could have done so?
10. Did you ever turn a blind eye to someone else's suffering?

The list of questions could go on and on, but we'll stop at ten. How many times did you answer "Yes"? For each "Yes," you are admitting that you lacked sincerity. You claimed to love ... but you didn't act it out.

Love is an action verb. We treat it like a piece of cotton candy fluff ... "I love you!" "I care about you!" "I'll be there for you!" ... but it goes no farther than the words on the air.

God's love is active. It is passionate. It goes the extra mile ... right to Calvary. There's nothing fluffy about God's love. Nothing vague when he says, "I love you."

Since we are to imitate God's love, Paul states that "love must be sincere." It's got to be honest. True. Pure. Genuine. Which means it's got to take action. In II Corinthians 5:14, Paul says, "the love of Christ compels us." Do you feel compelled by love?

- ❖ Give some examples of famous people who were compelled by love – people whose love was sincere – and what they did because of love.

- ❖ Now bring it closer to home. It's always good to show appreciation for each other in the Body of Christ: give examples of people in your own church who demonstrate a sincere love.

- ❖ Finally, take a minute and jot down three things you have been meaning to do to show you care about someone. Then go and do them. Love is only shown through action. Be sincere in your love.

Loyalty

The second aspect of love in Romans 12 is *loyalty*. Verse 10 reads, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”

Devotion. Loyalty. Not really a word that is heard much in our fast-paced, self-centered, impatient world. We count every minute ... but always for ourselves. Loyalty is about giving time and energy to another person over the long-haul. It's about commitment, even when the going gets tough.

- ❖ Give some examples of when we need to demonstrate loyal, devoted love within the church.

- ❖ Why is loyal love sometimes hard to demonstrate?

- ❖ How can you keep your strength up to demonstrate loyal love?

- ❖ What happens to you when you know that someone loves you loyally?

The church needs to be a place where people can go to experience love over the long haul. Many people won't respond to God's love quickly, and will need devoted, loyal love to soften them over time. Many people will have needs that take years to address, heal, or overcome ... or, perhaps, that will never be overcome in this lifetime. All these people need to know that there are brothers and sisters in Christ standing beside them, demonstrating God's loyal love here and now.

Generosity

The third aspect of love shown in Romans 12 is in verse 13: “Share with God's people who are in need.” *Generosity*.

To share generously means to be liberal in your giving ... giving abundantly. There's a Zits cartoon that shows what it means to be generous: Jeremy, a 15-year old, is passing a Salvation Army pot one December evening. He is dressed warmly, is wearing his high-top sneakers, and listening to CDs on a portable player. He reads the sign above the donation pot ... “Give Till It Hurts.” He tosses in a quarter and begins to move on. Then he stops, and thinks hard. The last scene shows his warm jacket, hat, sneakers, CDs, and portable player all jammed into the pot, and you hear Jeremy as he walks off, shivering, “Ooo! Oh! Cold!”

That's generous giving. He realized how much he had, and how much he was able to give. And he gave. Until it hurt.

❖ But perhaps it would be good to pause a minute here and ask: what needs do God's people have? What should we be on the lookout for? List examples of the following

- Material needs _____
- Emotional needs _____
- Mental needs _____
- Spiritual needs _____
- Physical needs _____

There are a lot of needs. And everyone of us has things that we can share. Money. Things. Time. Energy. Compassion. Wisdom. Friendship. Prayer.

Take careful stock of what you have that you can give to your brothers and sisters in Christ who are in need. Take a look at what needs are around you, and ask yourself, “What can I do?”

Oftentimes, the church needs to work together to help those in need ... because needs usually come in groups. Here's an example:

❖ Suppose a family in the church is suffering from financial strain. What do they need?

- ❖ But what if I told you that this is a long-standing problem. What else might they need?
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You see then that there are many ways to help out. You might think at first glance, I can't help them because I'm struggling financially myself. But perhaps that very fact is what you can give: the compassion you have because you're in the same boat, struggling with the same fears and doubts, trusting in the same God to pull you through. Often, people who are in a struggle feel ashamed or embarrassed – knowing that someone else knows and has been there or is there can itself be a great encouragement to them and build them up.

So take a look around. Use the prayer list that goes out each week ... look at it, and ask yourself, can I give something to any of these people? What? How can I give generously?

Then do it!

Hospitality

The next aspect to love in Romans 12 is *hospitality*. This is found simply in verse 13, "Practice hospitality."

This is a special aspect of love that I think we have lost sight of in the current generation. We're so busy nowadays that we don't visit as much. We don't open our homes as much to people. When we plan to get together with someone, we have to "fit it" into our calendar. Squeezing in an hour here or there. I don't know about you, but I'm not sure that's the way life should be. I don't want to be an entry on a calendar – at least, not one that had to be maneuvered in with a shoehorn. I don't want to be an item that is checked off between the laundry and taking the kids to soccer. I want to be a friend and have a friend. And that takes hospitality.

- ❖ What are key components of hospitality?
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You see, it's not about the casserole and dessert ... though those are welcome components of hospitality! It's about people. Hospitality, at its core, has to do with relationship-building. Opening the home is a way of opening the heart.

Hospitality reminds us that "no man is an island." It reminds us that we're interconnected. That we can't live without each other.

Hospitality provides a welcome space in our very busy lives to relax in one another's presence and enjoy each other as God's special creations.

❖ Who are your closest friends, and what makes the relationships so strong?

Are certain people gifted with a special something that flows out of them as hospitality? Yes. But insofar as each of us does in fact need other people, and each of us is needed by other people, we need to practice hospitality.

If we see each other only on Sunday morning, we will never develop the relationships that will carry us through times of doubt and pain and suffering and persecution. Nor will we do so if we only manage a time-crunched hour with a person every other month. I give that to you as a warning. We need to develop solid relationships within the church body that will sustain us through life and that will bring unbelievers to the Savior of their souls. That takes hospitality, and that takes time.

So take a look at your calendar or palm pilot. If you don't have some good blocks of time that you are opening or could open your home to people or accept their invitation, then chances are that you're too busy. Make the time to practice hospitality. Make the time to give and receive love.

❖ How busy are you? Do you need to change anything in your lifestyle? If so, what? How will you do it?

Empathy

The next aspect of love is *empathy*. Romans 12:15 read, “Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”

We live in a very self-centered world. I’m consumed by my problems, or engaged entirely with my happiness. Good or bad, my thoughts are on me.

As Christians, we need to be different. We need to have our thoughts focused on other people, just as Jesus focused his thought on us. He became one of us, cared for us, rejoiced with us at the wedding at Cana, wept with us at the tomb of Lazarus ... he empathized with us. And so we need to empathize with each other.

The key to empathizing with someone is to walk in their shoes. Use your God-given imagination to imagine what it would be like to be experiencing what they are experiencing. Ask yourself: if I was in that situation, What would I feel? What would I need? What would I want someone to say to me or do for me? What would I be thinking? Would my faith be upset at this?

As an aside, those are the questions I ask myself when I’m praying for someone that help me to pray effectively for someone.

- ❖ How good do you think people are, generally speaking, at empathizing with each other? Why?

It’s good to remember that both rejoicing and mourning are referenced here. Sometimes we focus on empathizing with someone when they’re hurting, but it’s equally important to learn to share joy with someone.

- ❖ What might prevent us from rejoicing with someone?

❖ What should you do if you're having trouble empathizing with some one?

So rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn. We are one body, and empathy is one of the key ways we will show that to a world who is watching us.

Humility

Next, *humility*. This is a big, even a huge, aspect of love. Verses 10 and 16 read, "Honor one another above yourselves Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."

This was a key aspect of Christ. Philippians 2:5 reads, "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who humbled himself."

Think of it: God's love caused God to humble himself. God. The Creator and Master of the universe. The one who above all else is worthy of all honor and praise and worship ... humbled himself.

There are several aspects to humility that are mentioned here:

- Do not be proud.
- Honor one another above yourselves.
- Associate with people of low position.

First, do not be proud. There is an important difference between pride and self-esteem that we need to understand. Pride is an I-focus. Pride puts me first, and me only. I am the best, I deserve the best, I don't care about the rest. I can do it all myself. I need no one. I am master of my fate and captain of my soul. I am the center of the universe.

A proper self-esteem, on the other hand, is very important. God doesn't want us to go around with a worm-of-the-earth mentality. We are to recognize that apart from him we are miserable sinners, and that we are saved by grace. But though we live our entire lives dependent upon him, we are now his sons and daughters, his glory and treasure, his most prized possession. That should give us a proper self-esteem: We are redeemed. We are loved. We are important to God himself.

So we should have a good self-esteem, but we should not be proud. We should focus on God and who we are *in him*. That changes our focus from ourselves to God. And because we are focusing

on God, we learn to look at other people as he looks at them: as treasures to be loved and respected.

- ❖ Do you struggle with pride? Under what circumstances are you particularly vulnerable to sin in that regard?

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- ❖ Do you have a healthy self-esteem? Why or why not?

This brings us to the second point: we should honor others above ourselves. Once I recognize that I am not the center of the universe and I focus on God, who is, then I am free to serve. Free to serve. I'm not looking out for #1 ... I'm looking out for the people around me. Making sure that they are well. Seeing what I can do for them. Freely giving them the honor they deserve as they serve the Lord.

You see, it's easy to become me-focused, even in the church. God doesn't want that. That's what the world looks like. So Paul instructs us to practice humility, putting others and their needs ahead of ourselves. And he gives one other very practical aspect: associate with people of low position.

There are several reasons that he points out this particular aspect:

- First, Jesus specified this, too. He said, "inasmuch as you have done so to the least of my brethren, you have done it unto me." Visiting the sick. The poor. The prisoners.
- Second, because associating with people of low position helps us become like Christ ... who was willing to associate with *us*.
- Third, it brings us out of our comfort zone, and so breaks down pride where it secretly lurks in our heart, and reveals and confronts prejudices we may not have been willing to admit to ourselves.

- Fourth, it lets us serve when there is basically no chance of reward or recognition – and that is the test of true service: are we serving to be noticed, or are we serving to minister to the needs of others.
- Fifth, it confronts the world’s value system that follows after fame and fortune. It proclaims a new direction to pour your energy: into the hurting, into the needy, into people whom the world says are nameless and faceless.
- Sixth, it restores dignity to the people “of low position.” Serving others lets them know they are important – to you and to God. And that will draw them to the kingdom of heaven.
- Seventh, it brings the kingdom of God on earth. It reverses some of the evil in the world, challenging it and vanquishing it.

So let go of your pride. Honor one another with a glad, thankful heart. And serve people whom the world ignores and debases. Because Jesus himself did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

❖ Who and how are you currently serving?

❖ Is God calling you to serve in any other ways? Perhaps outside your comfort zone?

Harmony

Finally, the seventh aspect of love noted here in Romans 12 is *harmony*. Verse 16 reads, “Live in harmony with one another.”

If we love with sincerity, loyalty, generosity, hospitality, empathy, and humility, we will then of a necessity live out another aspect of love: harmony. The enemies of harmony of divisiveness, self-centeredness, isolation, greed, and apathy. The very things that the other aspects of love we mentioned today destroy.

Jesus in John 17 prayed that we would be one, even as he is one with the Father and Spirit. Living in harmony. Living in love.

CONCLUSION

You can see, then, that in order to achieve unity in the church body, we have some very practical things we need to do: we need to love in deed, not just in word. We need to stick by one another. We need to give abundantly of our time, our money, and our heart. We need to make time to establish deep relationships with one another. We need to have empathy and compassion for one another. We need to focus on serving each other.

When we do so, we will become one. So don't pray for unity if you're not willing to work out your love in the daily road of life. If you're not willing to be there for someone else. If you're not willing to give until it hurts. Love hurts. Love costs. Just ask God. But when we truly love, we will become one. And that is truly cause for rejoicing in God.



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 7: "He Tripped Me!"

When People Hurt You

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 7: “He Tripped Me!”

When People Hurt You

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we studied Romans 12 and what it has to say about love. We reviewed seven aspects of love: sincerity, loyalty, generosity, hospitality, empathy, humility, and harmony. We recalled that in order to achieve unity in the church body, we have some very practical things we need to do: we need to love in deed, not just in word. We need to stick by one another. We need to give abundantly of our time, our money, and our heart. We need to make time to establish deep relationships with one another. We need to have empathy and compassion for one another. We need to focus on serving each other. When we do so, we will truly become one.

BUMPS IN THE ROAD OF LIFE

We’re going to spend this lesson in Romans 12, as well. This time, focusing on what it says about when we encounter bumps in the road of life ... specifically, what to do when people hurt you.

Now, there are unintentional hurts and intentional hurts.

❖ How might someone hurt you unintentionally?

❖ How might someone hurt you intentionally?

❖ Which is easier to forgive, and why?

We know that we are going to be hurt by others in this lifetime. We're fallen creatures. At the core, we are corrupt and lost and sinful. Those without Christ are still in that state, so it is natural for them to hurt other people, whether intentionally or not. We who are in Christ are redeemed, but we still battle the fallen nature, and we are going to lose periodically. We are going to hurt people and be hurt by people – both inside and outside the church.

Our goal, of course, is to be holy. Paul speaks to that point in verse 18 of Romans 12 where he says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

You and I have got a responsibility to live as pure and blameless a life as possible. That will promote peace in our lives and in the lives of those around us. But, let's face it – Paul does put a qualifier in there: "as far as it depends on you." He knew that sometimes, even when we are living a holy life, there isn't going to be peace. Someone is going to stir up trouble, intentionally or not. We are going to be hurt.

So the question is: what do we do when that happens?

DO'S AND DON'TS

This is where we will spend our lesson: what do we do when we've been hurt? Whether the hurt has been intentional or not is irrelevant; the principles remain the same. There are three sets of do's and don'ts that Paul commands in Romans 12 to address our actions when we have been hurt. If we follow these directives, it will go far toward restoring peace. And if peace cannot be achieved because the other person refuses it, it will at least mean that we will have God's peace within ourselves, because we will be blameless.

The three principles involve what you say, what you do, and what you think.

What You Say

The first pair of do's and don'ts regards what you say. Verse 14 reads, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

This is a really good place to start, because what typically happens when someone hurts us? We open our mouth and say something we later wish we hadn't.

It's our natural reaction. We feel wounded, we haven't had time to think things through, we haven't thought about whether or not the person meant to hurt us, it's the instant that it happens ... and we say something nasty in return.

Paul says: Hold your tongue. Don't say it. I know you're hurt ... but you have to keep a lid on what you say.

In fact, Paul is assuming here that it is an intentional hurt ... he refers to being "persecuted." A very intentional kind of harmful action.

The tongue. James has a lot to say about the tongue, so it would be good at this point to cross-reference ourselves into James 3:

We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check. The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell. No man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be.

James points out several key things about the tongue here:

- First, that it is one of the hardest parts of ourselves to keep in check.
- Second, that it can cause great damage ... to ourselves and others.
- Third, that we have an obligation as Christians to bring the tongue under control.

Let's look at each of those aspects:

- ❖ First, the tongue is one of the hardest parts of ourselves to keep in check. Why is that true?

- ❖ Second, the tongue can cause great damage, to ourselves and others. How can our tongue damage others? How can our tongue cause damage to ourselves?

- ❖ Third, why do we as Christians have a particular obligation to bring our tongues under control?

With all that in mind, let's return to Romans 12. Paul writes that when we are hurt, we are to "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

We said this was the first set of do's and don'ts. I'll actually call them don'ts and do's, because I want to look first at what we are commanded not to do, and then at what we are commanded to do.

First, then: do not curse the person who hurt you.

A curse is "a prayer or invocation for harm or injury to come upon one." Now, most of us aren't going to go around actually saying, "O Lord, I pray that you would smite that disgusting, rude, arrogant driver! Zap his cell phone with lightning and blow out his tires on nails in the road! May bird poop rust his fancy little sports car!"

But what are we going to do? What do we say?

- Insults: "You fool!" "You stupid idiot!" "You jerk!" This injures their dignity and self-esteem as a being created in the image of God. Remember that Jesus warned us that to call someone a fool was as serious as murder (Matthew 5:21-22).

- Gossiping: “Do you know what he did to me?” “I can’t believe she would say that!” This injures their reputation and relationships with other people.
- Wishes: “I wish you were dead!” “I hope you have an accident!” “I hope someone does that to you someday!” This is the closest we come to truly “cursing” someone. You are trying to injure their future well-being. Remember that when you “wish” or “hope” like that, you are in essence asking some spiritual power to make your wish come true. But God isn’t going to answer a “wish” like that. Satan would sure be willing to ... but do you really want to go trafficking with the devil?

So all of this is out. We are commanded not to say any of these things. No words spoken in anger. No insults right from the hip.

But it doesn’t stop there. I almost wish the verse read, “Be silent when people persecute you; say nothing and do not curse.” But it doesn’t. It says, “*Bless* those who persecute you; *bless* and do not curse” (italics mine).

This, then, is what we have to do. We have to go beyond self-controlled silence. We have to come to the point where we can actually bless the person who has hurt us.

Just as to curse someone was to pray that harm or injury would come upon them, to bless someone means to pray for divine care, prosperity, and happiness to be bestowed on someone.

Ooh. That hurts. Not only am I not to call the guy an idiot, but I have to wish him well?

❖ What’s your reaction to this command?

This is hard. It’s really hard. Why? Go back to what we said earlier: the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart. So in order to fulfill this command, our heart is going to have to change.

It’s good to get this on the table right away, because it is central to each and every principle we’re talking about today. You can’t do this on your own. You can’t do this without the Spirit of God. You can’t do this unless you have become a new person. You must have a change of heart. That is what we talked about a few lessons ago when we talked about the power God gives us to overcome sin in our lives.

So we are commanded to bless those who hurt us. How does that work in our day-to-day life? What kinds of things might you do to “bless” someone who has hurt you?

- Pray for them. Pray for God’s grace to work in their lives, for God’s protection over them, that God would help them see how they have hurt you, that God would bring them to repentance, etc.
 - Speak kindly to them. Don’t look the other way whenever you pass ... smile and say hello. You may not be able to go beyond common courtesy – after all, we’re not saying you have to try to be best friends here – but make sure you do always remain courteous and respectful.
 - Forgive them. Whether that forgiveness is dealt with between you and God alone, or whether you do have the opportunity to tell them that you forgive them, do it. Offer forgiveness. It frees you, and lets them know that it’s okay to come back to you and try to heal the relationship.
- ❖ Take a few minutes to consider a situation where someone hurt you badly, whether intentionally or unintentionally. What was your reaction?

- ❖ In light of this lesson, was your reaction appropriate or not? If not, what should it have been?

So that’s the first command: Don’t curse. Do bless.

Now, we move on.

What You Do

The second command involves what we do. Verse 17 reads, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”

“Do not repay evil for evil.” “Do what is right.”

So simple to say ... much harder to do.

First, the do not. Do not repay evil for evil.

- ❖ Give some ways we are inclined to repay evil for evil ... small and big.
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This is fairly straightforward. Do not, overtly or behind someone’s back, repay evil for evil. Don’t try to get the boss riled up against them. Don’t “accidentally” scratch or dent their car. Don’t “happen” to bump into them and spill their coffee. Whatever, big or small, control your actions.

But again, there’s more to it than that: “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” It’s not just a matter of avoiding evil ... holiness is more than that. It’s about doing what is right.

You see, God never lets us get away with simple avoidance. He doesn’t allow us to sit in apathy, and say, “Well, I didn’t do anything wrong ...” He wants more from us. Holiness is active. It’s passionate. It’s energized. Holiness involves actively doing the right thing in every circumstance.

- ❖ What might be involved in “doing what is right” when you have been hurt? Give some examples.
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- ❖ Why is it so important to actively do the right thing when you have been hurt?

Do not repay evil for evil. Do what is right.

What You Think

Finally, the third command, which involves what you think: verse 19 reads, “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.”

Do not take revenge. Do trust God.

First, do not take revenge.

- ❖ Revenge is certainly about action, but it begins with an attitude of the mind. What words come to mind when you think about someone bent on revenge?

Certainly a nasty set of characteristics. No wonder Paul warns us: do not take revenge! You don't want your mind and heart to become a breeding ground for the set of sins that goes along with revenge!

- ❖ Now, most of us aren't immediately filled with all these sins when someone hurts us. How does the desire for revenge take hold and breed all these other sins in our hearts?

I've said it in other lessons, and I'll say it again: treat no sin lightly. Deal with sin in your life while it's still small. If you don't, it will consume you and destroy you.

Do not take revenge. Next: do trust God.

You see, when we desire to take revenge, we are yanking our lives out of God's hands and saying, "Thanks anyway, God, but I'll handle this myself." Instead, Paul writes, "leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord."

Now, what does this verse not mean? It does not mean that we say, "Okay, God, he hurt me! Zap him with your lightning bolt! Nail him! Go get him, God!"

As a matter of fact, James and John tried something like that with Jesus once. The incident is recorded in Luke 9:51-56: "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. And he sent messengers on ahead, who went into a Samaritan village to get things ready for him; but the people there did not welcome him, because he was heading for Jerusalem. When the disciples James and John saw this, they asked, 'Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them, and they went to another village."

❖ Jesus rebuked them. Why?

So what does Romans 12:19 mean for us? It means that we have to trust God. We have to give up our right to get even. No revenge. No nursed grudges. No paybacks.

We have to trust him. Specifically, we have to trust him in two very key ways:

First, we have to trust God to deal with the other person. The verse reads, "leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." Let God deal with them. Trust God's justice, and God's timing.

For our God is a just God. He does address sin. There are three ways he addresses sin:

1. He may deal with it in this life. The person's sin may have very real consequences here and now. The person who made the pass at you may get fired for sexual harassment. The drunk driver may have his license revoked. Justice is very often meted out swiftly.

2. He may deal with it in the next life. If the person doesn't accept Christ as their Savior, they will receive just punishment for their sins in hell. Sometimes that happens without the first taking place ... the murderer gets away with it in this life and goes unpunished, but God will deliver justice upon the murderer's own death, if he is unredeemed.
3. He may deal with it with his life. This is very important to realize: Jesus gave his life for all our sins on the cross ... including the time that person hurt you. So if they accept his forgiveness, justice is satisfied ... because Jesus paid the penalty.

Now, there's something very key here: if we trust God to deliver justice, that means we've given up our right to get even. We're trusting God to deliver just punishment to the wrongdoer – in any one of those three ways. *If that is truly our attitude, we can and should desire their salvation and rejoice when it happens.*

Think about it for a minute. If I am harboring revenge in my heart, I may resent it if someone comes to know the Lord because, “now he won't get his just desserts.” Revenge makes us forget the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross ... he took all our “just desserts.”

You see this a lot when people say, “You talk about God's forgiveness. Are you saying that if Adolf Hitler repented on his deathbed, he'd be forgiven, just like that??”

The answer is, Yes. We are saying that. True repentance doesn't avoid just punishment. It recognizes that Jesus took the just punishment for us.

- ❖ Close your eyes a minute. Think about a person who has hurt you badly. Very badly. And never asked your forgiveness. Perhaps you're estranged from them. Perhaps you still see them, and they continue to take every opportunity to hurt you and make your life miserable. Can you honestly desire their salvation? Would you rejoice to see them come to know the Lord? Would you want to see them in heaven, enjoying everything right alongside you?
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- ❖ Open your eyes. If you had trouble saying “yes” to any of those questions, you may be harboring an unforgiving and revengeful spirit. If so, pray about it to the Lord, confess it to him, and ask for the grace to trust him ... to trust him for justice ... to trust him with the other person.

The second way we have to trust God, then, is with ourselves.

We have to trust that God is going to take care of us and our circumstances. We might be afraid that the person will continue to hurt us. “He’s lying to the boss about me ... he’ll make me lose my job!” “I have to do something to stop her from gossiping!”

Now, we should do what we can to remove ourselves from harm’s way – there’s nothing wrong with that. But just as we shouldn’t get even with the person who hurt us, we also shouldn’t worry about them or the effect they can have on us. God will take care of us and our circumstances. Life may not be very nice for awhile; we may lose some things that are important to us; we may be hurt many times. But God is faithful, and he will not give us more than we can bear. He will work everything in our lives together for the good. Even the hurts and wrongs other people do us.

So don’t take revenge. Trust God. With the other person and with yourself. He is just, and he is loving. He’ll take care of you.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, you and I are going to be hurt in this life. Often. Intentionally or unintentionally. By people in the church and by people outside of it. When it happens, watch what you say. Do not curse the person. Do bless them. Be careful about what you do. Do not pay back evil for evil. Do what is right. Get your thoughts and attitude right. Do not take revenge. Do trust God.

When you do, you can know that your life will be blameless, and God will take care of you.



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 8: Know Your Strengths *Spiritual Gifts*

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 8: Know Your Strengths

Spiritual Gifts

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we studied Romans 12 and what it has to say about what we should do when people hurt us. We pointed out that you and I are going to be hurt in this life. Often. Intentionally or unintentionally. By people in the church and by people outside of it. When it happens, we need to follow three principles, comprised of three pairs of do's and don'ts. Watch what you say. Do not curse the person. Do bless them. Be careful about what you do. Do not pay back evil for evil. Do what is right. Get your thoughts and attitude right. Do not take revenge. Do trust God. When you do, you can know that your life will be blameless, and God will take care of you.

THE EXHORTATION

In this lesson, we turn to the topic of knowing your strengths ... a very important thing if we are to run this race called the life in Christ well. Our key passage is again in Romans 12, as we look into the topic of our spiritual gifts. There are several other key passages on spiritual gifts in the Bible, but we will focus on this one passage in Romans now.

I like to start this discussion on spiritual gifts with verse three, because it grounds us so well for the information that follows: "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you."

This verse sets us up to talk about spiritual gifts. There are three exhortations given here by Paul that will guard us as we talk about spiritual gifts:

First, do not be proud. "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought."

Why would Paul say that? We're talking about strengths here, we're talking about the things you do well, that come easy, that shine out of you. It's easy therefore to fall into the sin of putting on airs and sticking your nose in the air and saying, "See what I can do!"

Second, be realistic. "Think of yourself with sober judgement."

Why that exhortation? There are a couple of reasons. For instance, people often say, "I have no spiritual gifts." Well, that's a lie from the devil, because God has given spiritual gifts to everyone. So take a good, sober look at yourself and see what they are. Or, people may go the opposite direction from pride and say, "I'm a terrible, miserable worm and can do no good in God's kingdom." That is also a lie. We are children of God and children of light and we are to

spread God’s kingdom throughout this earth, in large part through the gifts he has given us. So a “worm of the earth” mentality is forbidden here, too.

Third, be humble. “In accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”

Why this exhortation? Because it’s important to realize that these are spiritual *gifts*. And therefore there is a spiritual *Gift-Giver*. God has given you these gifts. You didn’t do this on your own. This isn’t from you or about you. It’s all about God. Therefore, be humble. Receive the gift gladly, and use it wisely.

Therefore: do not be proud, be realistic, be humble. But that’s not all that Paul has to say.

❖ Which of these three exhortations do you find the most difficult personally? Why?

THE BODY

Paul then turns in verses 4 and 5 to the familiar concept of the body: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

There are three main concepts here: diversification, cooperation, and interrelation. In order to understand these concepts better, we’re going to answer five questions about each.

First, diversification. “These members do not all have the same function,” verse 4.

❖ What does it mean?

❖ Why is it important?

❖ What happens without it?

❖ Why do we sometimes fight it?

❖ How do we make it work well?

Second, cooperation. “In Christ we who are many form one body,” verse 5.

❖ What does it mean?

❖ Why is it important?

❖ What happens without it?

❖ Why do we sometimes fight it?

❖ How do we make it work well?

Third, interrelation. “Each member belongs to all the others,” verse 5.

❖ What does it mean?

❖ Why is it important?

❖ What happens without it?

❖ Why do we sometimes fight it?

❖ How do we make it work well?

We're all different, we should all work together, and we are all interrelated. That's body life, and that's what makes us strong.

WHAT IS A SPIRITUAL GIFT?

As part of that body life, God has given us various gifts. Verse six reads, “We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”

What is a spiritual gift? Charles Swindoll's definition is “a skill or ability which enables a Christian to perform a function within the body of Christ with ease and effectiveness.”

Let's take a look at the three aspects of that definition:

First, a spiritual gift is a skill or ability. Sometimes, people think they have no spiritual gifts because they don't know what to look for. One of my friends was like that. She was a fairly new Christian and I was discipling her. She was convinced she had no spiritual gifts. So for about three months, I listened carefully to the things she said, and watched what she did. And you know what she did? She met an old friend on the bus and immediately invited them to church. She had an intense desire to talk about Jesus, so walked up to a neighbor's house and “talked Jesus” to her for two hours. She led her sister to the Lord in the hour her sister's flight was delayed.

My friend is a very gifted evangelist. She just has what it takes to introduce people to Jesus. But she didn't recognize it, probably because it came so naturally and was such a normal part of her.

That's the way it is with most spiritual gifts. It's a skill or an ability you probably do everyday.

Let's go to the second point – a spiritual gift is something you do with ease and effectiveness.

It “comes naturally” to you. But in fact, it's more than that – it comes *supernaturally* to you. Because a spiritual gift is *part of you*, you may not realize that it is in fact a supernatural gift from God. You may think that you should be walking down the street, minding your own business, and a spiritual gift would be if you were suddenly surrounded with a halo of light and developed the evangelistic power of Billy Graham in an instant when you normally can't put two words together.

Not usually. A spiritual gift is part of you, and it's something that you do well in the normal course of your life. One of my gifts is teaching. Many people have commented, “I just couldn't stand up in front of people and talk ... how do you do it?” Honestly, it's easy to me. I just do it. People have also asked, “How do you come up with lessons? It must be hard and take a lot of time.” I do spend hours on each lesson, but actually, it usually comes easy. I look at a passage, or at a book of the Bible, or at a topic, and in fairly short order everything falls into a general outline with the major points and applications delineated, and then it's just a matter of fleshing it out.

The point is, a spiritual gift comes with ease to you. It's a skill or ability you have that you don't have to fight to do well.

So far, though, what we've said could also be said for a natural talent. The key point that differentiates a natural talent from a spiritual gift is the third point of the definition: a spiritual gift enables a Christian to perform a function within the body of Christ.

I am talented at music: I like playing a variety of instruments. You might be talented at skiing: you fly down the slopes like you were born to them. A friend might be talented at organizing things: you wish her home was yours. But these aren't spiritual gifts *unless* they enable you to perform a function within the body of Christ.

Spiritual gifts bear fruit within the body of Christ. When my friend referenced earlier talks to someone about God, they almost inevitably end up going to church with her. Often when she asks them about salvation, they're born again within two hours. Now, when I share the gospel, I never have results that come anywhere close to what she does day by day. Why? Because evangelism is her gift, not mine. I'm called to share the Good News – we all are – but the fruit she bears in that area far outshines mine. And that's okay. Why? Because we all have different gifts designed to accomplish different tasks, working together to bring the kingdom of God on earth.

So, as Swindoll writes, a spiritual gift is “a skill or ability which enables a Christian to perform a function within the body of Christ with ease and effectiveness.”

- ❖ What are your spiritual gifts? (If you don't know, seek out a spiritual gifts questionnaire: there are many online and printed versions available.)

- ❖ How are you currently using your spiritual gifts?

❖ What results have you seen when you have used your spiritual gifts?

Now, let's look at the gifts listed in Romans 12.

THE GIFTS

Verses 6-8 read, "If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."

As we mentioned earlier, this is not designed as a comprehensive list of spiritual gifts, but it does give us a good sampling. Let's look at them:

Prophecy

Basically, a prophet is a mouth. Specifically, a prophet is a mouth for God. Therefore, any person who reveals the mind of God to other people is a prophet. Only a very small portion of it is "foretelling." As someone has said, it is really "forth-telling." Speaking forth God's Words.

Prophecy may take a variety of forms. For instance, think of the Christian who counsels others. What, ideally, does he do? He listens to their problems, and points out to them how God can help them, and how to get back into a healthy relationship with God. In so doing, they will get back into a healthy relationship with themselves.

As another example, pastors may have the gift of prophecy. They stand at the front of the church to bring us God's Word. Yes, they work from the Scripture, but part of being a godly pastor is knowing what Scripture to bring forward to meet the needs of the congregation. And how to say it in such a way that they will not only listen, but really hear it.

Evangelists often may have the gift of prophecy as well. They are able to look at people and know where the needs really are, and know how to bring God's Word to meet those needs.

So a prophet is not someone who dresses in camel hair and eats peculiarly and gets up on a soapbox and preaches doom and destruction. A prophet is anyone who brings the Word of God to people who need to hear it.

- ❖ List some examples of when you have benefited from the gift of prophecy: times when someone's words spoke directly to your heart, as if it were God himself speaking.
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But there is a warning attached to this gift – as I think there are warnings attached to all gifts. The reason for the warning is because every strength that we have has a corresponding weakness that we need to be careful of. Here, Paul says, “let it be according to the proportion of his faith.” What I believe that means is this: a child may have the gift of prophecy if they are born again. But does that child know how to use it? No, of course not. The child has to grow up, learn the Scriptures, grow in their relationship with God, learn how to hear the urging of the Spirit, and make all the mistakes that we all do as we learn to develop our gifts.

Prophecy is like any other gift: my first fiction stories are a riot because they were so poorly written. My first efforts at teaching needed a lot of improvement. Likewise, someone with the gift of prophecy needs to practice and develop that gift like any other. Prophecy does not mean that someone opens their mouths and divine words fall out, and they have no control or idea of what is coming. Prophecy refers to a depth of insight and sensitivity to other people and to God so that the prophet can recognize and respond to a spiritual need. It comes with maturity and practice.

That is why Paul gives this warning. He says, “All right – so you're a prophet. Learn in a thousand, thousand tiny ways how to use and develop your gift. Never think that you can do no wrong and make no errors – everyone can make errors. Simply put: as your faith grows, your gift will grow. An immature faith will make more mistakes than not with the gift of prophecy. It is only with a mature relationship *with* God that you will be able to speak accurately *for* God.”

- ❖ What can happen if someone makes a mistake with the gift of prophecy? i.e., they think they have heard from God when they haven't, they speak with the wrong motive, etc.
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Service

The next gift is a blessed one to discuss: “if service, in his serving.” This covers so many things. This covers the guys who do the sound equipment, the fellowship team when they make meals, the prayer chain in its praying, and the whole slew of “anything we do to help others and the Body function.”

Service is characterized by a willing and generous heart. My mother has the gift of service in abundance. She is completely willing to work behind the scenes and get any job done, and done well. She pays attention to a thousand details, thinks things through to completion, and always has her ears open to listen to what people might need. In everything she does, she gives 100% of herself to make the job done in the best possible way.

Sometimes, though, people who have the gift of service can feel sad because they are not often “front and center” people. Therefore, I encourage you to always encourage these people: they need to be told often that they are doing a wonderful and faithful job. They don’t often get that recognition. And the thing is: people with the gift of service are in many ways the backbone of the church. *They keep things running.* They make sure the pastor can focus on his preaching, that the teacher doesn’t have to worry about anything except his lessons. They make ideas work in the real world. They administrate, organize, plan, and perform. Every person who is “front and center” in the public eye is supported and made effective by dozens of these people who are called to serve. Therefore, every true, spiritual “success” – conversions, discipleship, books, etc. – that comes seemingly directly through the preaching or teaching of one of these “front and center” people is also the success of every server who made it possible. The one who did the actual preaching or teaching or evangelizing was just the visible tip of the iceberg.

Gifts of service may include mechanical aptitude, financial knowledge, administration, etc. This is one of the widest ranging gifts. More than any other, it covers not only what we do in the church, but what we do in our jobs as well. All our talents and experience and knowledge can be funneled into a gift of service in the body of Christ.

- ❖ Think of the people in your church. Who has the gift of serving? How do they serve? How can you encourage them and let them know the importance of their gift?

Teaching

To move on, teaching. Teaching is necessary at all times in our lives, therefore, teachers must exist at all levels. There are the teachers we had as children, the pastor's teaching from the pulpit, Sunday school, youth group, books, discipleship classes and relationships, etc. Teaching is not always up at the front of a class: the most effective teaching is often one on one, as one who is more mature and wise gives of that knowledge to a "younger" person (younger in the faith, not necessarily in years).

The teacher has to remember that they are not the fount of all knowledge and wisdom. Rather, they are simply vessels to take from the wisdom of God and pour it out to other people. When I teach now, I pass on the understanding God has given me over the years, I draw on the wisdom of the saints who have gone before, and I remember what others have taught. Teachers pass things on. Teachers teach nothing "new." They merely present old truths in such a way that they make a new impact.

- ❖ Name the most effective teachers you ever had. What made them effective? What impact did they have on your life?

Exhortation

Next, exhortation. This is a gift I think we have greatly lost sight of in the American church. The gift of spurring people on; encouraging them toward love and good deeds. We are so much "lone ranger" Christians nowadays: and that, not always by choice.

I cannot describe to you the change that took place in my plans and outlook the day my theology professor took me aside after an oral presentation and told me very seriously, "you would make an excellent teacher." And then over the course of the next year, proceeded to help me understand and develop that gift. Up to that point, I had never really considered the option. I knew I was a moderately good actress, and I knew I could teach people one on one, but the idea of getting up here and just talking ... to be honest, I laughed at him and thought he was crazy!

But he exhorted me. He motivated me. He helped clear and focus my thinking. Remember when Paul and Barnabas set forth? The church there was praying and fasting and God said to them, "set aside Paul and Barnabas for the work which I have called them." So they prayed and fasted some more, laid hands on them, and sent them forth. The phrase I love there is, "laid their hands on them." Exhortation reminds us that we are linked in to the body of Christ. Paul and Barnabas were going to be very public figures. But their mission began, as all missions do, within the

quietness of the church, with the exhortation of the rest of the Body acknowledging their gift and the plan God had for them, sending them forth while at the same time swearing to support them.

Exhortation is not the ability to “hype” people. People with the gift of exhortation probably do not rant and rave up at the pulpit. Exhorters are spurred on with the confidence that God gives them to encourage others along their own paths with God. They can see gifts in other people that perhaps those others do not recognize themselves. They help people through the initial stages of being frightened to use their gifts. They encourage people through the mistakes that they make. It’s okay not to be perfect: God calls us to get up and try again when we blow it. He expects us to makes mistakes sometimes. No child walks the first time they manage to get on their feet.

Someone with the gift of exhortation is different from someone who is just all “hype.” And the way you can tell – as in everything in life – is by the fruits they produce. A person who “hypes” others makes people feel an adrenaline rush. But when the rush is gone, the people are the same. The person with the gift of exhortation plows through the apathy or lethargy or ignorance of others, and under the influence of that exhortation people’s lives change. They are spurred on with new hope, new understanding, and a new realization that God can work through them. Exhorters are the breath of new life in the Church, as they encourage people to get the job done.

- ❖ When have you experienced effective exhortation in your life? What was the situation? How did the person exhort you? What happened as a result?

Giving

“He who gives, with liberality.” Giving, like these other gifts, is not narrowly defined. As we discussed previously, we can give money, yes, but beyond that, we can give time, effort, and ourselves. Giving is often tied very much in with service. Therefore, giving refers to a fullness of heart, not a fullness of wallet.

- ❖ What do you find it easiest to give: money, effort, or time? What do you find hardest to give?

Leadership

“He who leads, with diligence.” Leadership is another one of those “front and center” gifts. And like all the “front and center” gifts, the person with the gift of leadership must spend many years growing strong in Christ. Otherwise, he or she will not know where to lead others. And also likewise, the gift of leadership must be exercised with a heavy dose of humility, lest the leader forget that he or she is also a follower – following the Head, who is Christ alone.

Leadership in the church should refer to the pastor, but also covers many other ministries. In fact, every ministry should have someone with the gift of leadership in it. For instance, the missions board needs to have direction and leadership as they decide who and how to support people, how to bring awareness of missions to the congregation, and how to use the funds they have. Church education needs to have leadership as the teachers and pastors decide what areas need strengthening and teaching, and how to meet those needs. There needs to be financial leadership. Leadership for evangelism. For building projects. For marriage ministries. And the list goes on.

Therefore, leadership takes many forms and takes on many ministries. A leader is a clear thinker, a committed and knowledgeable believer, and someone with the strength of character to bring lazy or hazy people into what needs to be done. They need to have *diligence*, as Paul said, because leading is a hard and heavy business. It is an upward climb all the way. The leader may know the view from the mountaintop is great, and he knows that it will be worth all the trek to get there, but he has to bring many people who may not understand that up the steep slope with him. He needs to be able to share his vision, and the hope that it gives. He needs to be able to encourage others when they are depressed and when the situation is lousy. A leader is one who knows the goal and will get there and bring all those who are following there with him, no matter what the personal cost may be, and no matter what trials he may face.

- ❖ Name some of the great leaders of history. What made them great? Why did people follow them? What did they accomplish?

Mercy

Lastly, Paul lists mercy, and bids those with the gift to “show mercy with cheerfulness.” Mercy is a tenderness of heart that brings healing to others. Mercy is compassion. Mercy is love in action. And Paul bids us to show mercy “with cheerfulness,” for mercy will of necessity be walking in very uncheerful surroundings.

- Mercy is what a doctor should show to his patients.
- Mercy is what a teacher should show to the students.
- Mercy is what a counselor should show to the weary.
- Mercy is what an evangelist should show to the unsaved.

All hard surroundings. But we are to show mercy out of the well-being and cheer of our own hearts. We cannot give what we do not have. We cannot show mercy if we do not live with the recognition of having received God's mercy ourselves.

- ❖ Who do you know who has the gift of mercy? What do they do? How do they minister? How do people respond to them?
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CONCLUSION

We have each been given spiritual gifts by God in order to accomplish his work in the world. In order to do that, we need to recognize each other's strengths as well as our own, cooperate with each other in the tasks that need to get done, and realize that we are truly one in the Body of Christ.



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 9: In the Public Eye

Living in the World

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 9: In the Public Eye

Living in the World

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we looked at Romans 12 and what it had to say about spiritual gifts. We have each been given spiritual gifts by God in order to accomplish his work in the world. In order to do that, we need to recognize each other's strengths as well as our own, cooperate with each other in the tasks that need to get done, and realize that we are truly one in the Body of Christ.

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, we're moving out of chapter 12 into chapter 13, and what it has to say about living in the public eye. Living in the world. After all, we're not running this race on a private track with no one but the saints watching ... we're running in full view of a fallen world. And we interact with it day by day. So in this lesson, we're going to look at what Romans has to say about living in the world. We're going to divide it into two sections: relating to the government, and relating to society.

GOVERNMENT

First, we'll look at relating to the government. To give an overview, let's read verses 1-7 of Romans 13:

Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

First, let's talk about government. Not our particular government, or another country's government, but about "government" as an abstract. Verse one states that government has been established by God.

There are three specific reasons indicated in this passage as to why God established government:

1. Verses 1-2 hint that it is a picture of one of the aspects of our relationship with God: specifically, a picture of submission, authority, and judgement. Therefore, it can help us in our relationship with God.
2. Verses 3-5 indicate clearly that government was designed to uphold moral law and execute justice on evildoers.
3. Verse 6 states that government is supposed to take care of matters that affect all those who govern: they collect taxes in order to provide services that we could not do individually, i.e., social work, defense, law and order, etc.

We see therefore that government, as God intended, is a good thing, pure and simple. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. And keeping that image of a godly government in mind, we can turn to what our response should be to the government, as delineated in these verses. Just as there were three reasons noted that God established government, there are now three responses that we should have to the government.

First, obedience. Verse 1: “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities.” Verse 3, “Do what is right and he will commend you.”

❖ How do we demonstrate obedience to the government?

Second, resources. Verse 6, “This is also why you pay taxes.” And verse 7, “Give everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue.”

❖ What resources should we willingly give to the government?

Third, respect. Verse 7, “If respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”

- ❖ What are some ways we show respect to the government?

Now, if we consider the ideal government, I think we would willingly be able to give our obedience, resources, and respect to it. But clearly, some governments align themselves against God and his moral law. The Nazi regime or Pol Pot’s killing fields, for example.

- ❖ Are we still supposed to give our obedience, resources, and respect to an ungodly government? Demonstrate your answer from Scripture.

- ❖ What principles do we see from these examples of when and how to resist an ungodly government?

Now, does this give rise to further questions? Absolutely, such as would it ever be right to sanction and participate the overthrow of an unjust government ... your country’s or another’s? Even if that involved violence and loss of life? How would you make your decision? Difficult questions, but ones we won’t look at today because they’re not the focus of Romans 13. Romans 13 focuses on our response to the ideal government: obedience, resources, respect.

SOCIETY

Now, we move away from government to how we live in relation to society. And interestingly enough, Paul says that two simple words should govern all our interactions with society. Nothing complex. No lengthy series of conditional statements or legal contract language ... just two simple concepts: love and holiness.

Love

Three lessons ago, we studied seven aspects of love: sincerity, loyalty, generosity, hospitality, empathy, humility, and harmony. We now come back to the topic of love. Verses 8 through 10 read, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Since we discussed love in depth a few weeks ago, we are going to limit our discussion in this lesson to two key pictures of love that are shown in this passage: love as a debt, and love as a duty.

First, love as a debt. Verse 8 reads, “Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law.”

❖ Why might you go into debt?

❖ If you have a debt, who do you pay?

Here in Romans 13, we see love described as a debt. So the question becomes: why are we in debt and to whom do we owe that debt? I don't think the debt is to society, because we are called to love even if the society or government is evil. So it's not in payment for something society or the government did for us or gave us – they may have given us nothing. Remember, Paul is writing to Christians in Rome ... Rome was notorious for giving Christians a very bad time. Instead, I think I John 4:19 answers both questions: “We love because he first loved us.” We are in debt to God, because God gave us his love when we didn't deserve it and couldn't earn it. And

we “pay him back” by loving him and other people. This, then, helps us to understand why Paul calls it a “continuing debt” ... God keeps loving us, so we always owe love to him and others in return.

Second, love as a duty. Verses 9-10 read, “The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

We so often associate “love” with an emotion, that we can forget that it is our duty. We are commanded to love: Paul says in essence here, “Love is your one rule and law. You must do this.” It’s not an option: it’s our duty.

❖ When might it be hard to demonstrate love toward a non-believing world and government?

❖ There are certainly times you’re not going to “feel” loving toward others. How might it help you to respond when you remember that love is a duty?

But Paul has something else to say about love. And he says it in verses 11 and 12: “And do this, understanding the present time. The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is nearly over; the day is almost here.”

Verse 11: “And do this ...” Do what? Love! Paul says, “Be *sure* to love, I’m *commanding* you to love, because of what time it is.” And what time is it? The time of Christ’s return. “The hour has come for you to wake up ... our salvation is near ... the night is nearly over...” In short, “Love, because Christ is coming back soon!”

We are to love *in expectancy of Christ’s return*. Now, perhaps you’re thinking, “Sure, but that was written 2000 years ago! It wasn’t really ‘soon’ then, so how do I know it’s ‘soon’ now?” That’s a theme that runs throughout the New Testament: Christ is coming back. You don’t know

when. Therefore, live like he's coming back today ... you never know, he might! And in God's eyes, it is "soon."

So why should we love? Because when Christ returns, you and I as Christians are going to be judged. The Bible is very clear about this: you and I will be called to give account of what we have done in this life. Heaven is assured to us because we have accepted Christ's sacrifice – that's not the issue. But we will be judged on how we lived this life.

The best passage that describes how we will be judged is found in Matthew 25:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

If you wanted to summarize this passage in one sentence, it would be this: We will be judged on how we loved.

That is why Paul states so urgently, "And do this, understanding the present time."

Holiness

Finally, let's look at holiness. Verses 12 through 14 read, "So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature."

"So let us ..." Here's another cause and effect statement, just like we saw a moment ago with love. With love, Paul said, "And *do this*, understanding the present time." Here, he is just continuing the thought ... "Christ is coming back. *So let us* put aside the deeds of darkness."

He's returning. We will be judged. *Therefore*, live a life of holiness. You will be judged on what you do, so be holy. In fact, holiness works hand-in-hand with love – you can't have one without the other.

That same sense of expectancy permeates Paul's discussion here of holiness, which is the second watchword we should be aware of as we interact with society. We should love people, and live holy lives among them.

In verse 13, Paul gives us four principles to guide us to holy living:

The first principle is found in the words, "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime." We are to live a transparent life. In short, don't do anything you'd be ashamed of if someone caught you at it! Do nothing, say nothing, imply nothing that you wouldn't mind everyone knowing. Live in the daylight: all your life an open book for all to see.

Does that mean that we can't have privacy in our lives? No, of course not. It just means that whatever you do in private should be holy, so that if it ever did come out, you would not be ashamed ... and God would not be dishonored.

- ❖ Have you ever been caught doing something you shouldn't have been doing? What happened? Why were you engaged in the activity? What was the result?

The second principle is found in the reference to not participating in "orgies and drunkenness." We should live a self-controlled life. Orgies and drunkenness both refer to unhealthy excesses. An orgy involves food (and often sex), and drunkenness involves alcohol. Food and sex are fine in their appropriate place – but an orgy is not. Alcohol is fine in its place – but not drunkenness.

- ❖ Why is excess forbidden?

❖ What other areas besides food, sex, and alcohol can we engage in excess in?

So we are to live lives of self-control: keeping everything in its rightful, God-ordained place. When we do so, we will be able to enjoy and engage in all things, but will keep our eyes focused on God with a sense of gratitude, thanksgiving, joy, and stewardship.

The third principle is in the next pair of sins noted: that we are not to live in “sexual immorality and debauchery.” Instead, we are to live a pure life. We have spoken before of how sexual immorality quickly follows rebellion against God. Therefore, we are to live lives of sexual purity – and indeed, purity in all areas.

Finally, the fourth principle is that we should live a peaceful life. The verse states that we should not engage in “dissension and jealousy.” Dissension, or division, involves conflict – here it is implied that it is not a conflict based upon “good vs. evil,” but rather conflict because I want my own way. Jealousy is often subtler than dissension, but it does the same thing: disrupts and destroys relationships based upon selfishness.

Instead, we are to seek for peace. That means that we would avoid gossiping, envy, jealousy, petty arguments, pride, actively seeking conflict, lying, slander, and encouraging anyone to do the same.

Holiness. Living a transparent, self-controlled, pure, peaceful life. But how do we do that? How do we live in holiness? And, going back to love, how do we love like Christ loved us?

The answer is found in verse 14: “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

In this case, I’d like to quote it in the NAS version as well: “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.”

This is a two-part battle image. First, “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” Armor yourself with him. This harkens back to Ephesians 6, and the list of the armor of God we are to put on – truth, righteousness, the gospel, faith, salvation and the Word of God. In essence, that list is summarized in one phrase here: *Put on the Lord Jesus Christ*. Clothe yourself with him. Get inside him, hide behind him, let him be what the world sees when they look at you, guard yourself with him, let him come between you and all that is in the world. Jesus should be as close to you – closer – than your clothing. You should rely on him the way a soldier does his armor – Christ is all that stands between you and death. He should be your strength.

Secondly, “Make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts.” This is another battle image. When you go to war, you take provisions with you. You take exactly what you need to survive, and don’t burden yourself down with extras or useless or harmful things.

For instance, a soldier would not take Sweet Tarts and Tootsie Rolls for his source of food. He’d quickly starve to death! He’ll take high protein, complex foods that will sustain him for the long haul. He won’t take soda – it doesn’t satisfy. He’ll take pure water. He won’t take designer clothes – they wouldn’t serve any purpose on the battlefield. He doesn’t take Scrabble or Monopoly – they would just weigh him down.

So here, the image is clear: you’re going to war. Be careful what you take with you. Don’t burden yourself with extra things that you don’t need, useless things that aren’t effective, or harmful things that will only hurt you.

❖ Give examples of things that can burden you down and hamper you in your Christian walk.

Very often, we entertain and play with sin. We wander into the movie store when we know we have a weakness for R-rated flicks. We casually buy a gallon of ice cream when we know we have a weight and self-control problem. We engage in a little “harmless” talk about a co-worker and ignore the fact that it is gossip.

If we follow this command, however, we will make no provision for our sin. We won’t do the things that set us up to fail. We won’t engage in activities that are dangerous. We won’t waste time and energy on things that are useless. And if we don’t, then the sin nature in us will starve to death ... which is exactly what we want! We want to feed holiness, and starve sin. We want to armor ourselves with Christ and provision ourselves to live holy lives, grinding sin into powder beneath our feet.

You can do it. God will never command the impossible. When we truly clothe ourselves with Christ, he makes love and holiness more than possible – he makes them a reality in our lives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, government is ordained by God to serve his purposes, and therefore we should accord the government our respect, resources, and obedience. In all our interactions with society as a whole, we should live lives of love and holiness. Love is both our debt and our duty, and holiness is characterized by living a transparent, self-controlled, pure, peaceful life. This is all made possible when we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” and make no provision for the sinful nature.



Running the Race

A Look at the Life in Christ from the Book of Romans

Lesson 10: The Art of Recruiting

Telling the Good News

Paula J. Marolewski

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Lesson 10: The Art of Recruiting

Telling the Good News

REVIEW

In the last lesson, we looked at Romans 13 and what it had to say about how we are to interact with the world. We discussed that government is ordained by God to serve his purposes, and therefore we should accord the government our respect, resources, and obedience. We then discussed that in all our interactions with society as a whole, we should live lives of love and holiness. Love is both our debt and our duty, and holiness is characterized by living a transparent, self-controlled, pure, peaceful life. This is all made possible when we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” and make no provision for the sinful nature.

INTRODUCTION

In this lesson, we’re going to look at another aspect of running the race of the life in Christ ... namely, the art of recruiting! Getting out there and convincing other people to join us in the race! In short, evangelism.

We’re going to jump around a bit in Romans, since Paul has so much to say about this topic. Basically, we’ll be in chapters 1, 9, and 10.

We’re going to divide our look at “the art of recruiting” into five different areas that together will give us a complete picture of what Paul thought was important about spreading the good news. Those five areas are: Person, People, Passion, Power, and Purpose.

PERSON

When we talk about evangelism, many people freeze up. You hear phrases like, “I can’t share my faith!” “I don’t know what to say!” “Where do you begin?” “It’s so complicated!”

But in fact, it’s not complicated at all. It begins and ends with a Person ... the Person who is at the heart of the gospel, and the core of our faith: Jesus Christ.

This is, in fact, where Paul begins his letter to the Romans. Beginning with the first verse of Romans 1 we read, “Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God – the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Paul lays out here everything you really need to “show and tell” about the plan of salvation ... and that is, everything you need to know about Jesus.

Let’s break it apart:

First, it’s good news. That’s what “gospel” means. Many of the people out there whom you are going to meet are convinced that God, if there is a God, is the guy upstairs with the baseball bat. “God must hate me!” “I’m a miserable sinner – God wouldn’t want me!” “I deserve to go to hell.”

So the first thing to tell people is that you have GOOD NEWS for them! You’re not out there preaching hellfire and brimstone and trying to scare people about a judgmental God ... though remember, there’s a place to talk about hell, and a place to talk about judgment. But the only reason you bring up hell and judgment is to share the good news: that they don’t have to experience either! Whew! What a relief! What a burden to be rolled away! You don’t have to go to hell! You don’t have to experience the wrath and judgment of an angry God. I have GOOD NEWS for you!

Second, this good news was promised from the very beginning. You can see it throughout the Bible ... God has been reaching out to man and planning for his salvation from the very first moment he sinned. This is important to know, because there are a thousand and one fad solutions on the market each week. And each one is forgotten just as quickly. Our good news has remained unchanged since the beginning of time! It’s a classic ... it’s been on the best seller list since there was a best seller list. It has worked for thousands of years, and it will work for you.

Third, the whole center and focus of the good news is Jesus. Not Jesus and works, or Jesus and enlightenment, or Jesus and your nationality, or Jesus and your past ... it’s just about Jesus. He did it all. It’s not about you – it’s about him. The only thing you have to do is say “Yes.”

Fourth, Jesus is the center of the good news because he is God and man – both, in perfect harmony. If he wasn’t man, he wouldn’t have been able to die for the sins of men. If he wasn’t God, he wouldn’t have been perfect or a big enough sacrifice to die for everyone’s sins. He had to be both, and he was both. Perfect divinity, and perfect humanity.

Finally, it is good news because of what Jesus did: he rose from the dead after dying for our sins. His sacrifice was accepted, proven in the resurrection. We serve a living Savior, not a dead hero. He successfully paid the penalty for our sins and rose victorious over sin and death.

And that’s the gospel: I have good news! From the beginning of time, God has wanted to forgive you and save you! He did it by sending Jesus – his Son, perfect God and perfect man. Jesus died on the cross for your sins and rose victorious from the dead so that you could serve a living Savior!

Second, we are obligated to tell everyone.

❖ What does it mean when we say we are obligated?

So why don't we do it? Why don't we tell everyone? Here are some of the main reasons:

- Fear. "Will they think I'm crazy?"
- Dislike. "I hate him!"
- Confusion. "I don't know what to say."
- Procrastination. "I'll do it tomorrow."
- Apathy. "It's not that important."
- Denial. "It's not my job."

But when we recognize that spreading the gospel is an *obligation*, then none of those excuses hold up! Take the time to find at least one Bible verse to answer each excuse. For example, 1 John 4:18, "But perfect love drives out fear" is a good scriptural response when we are afraid to share the good news.

❖ Fear. "I'm afraid to speak up!"

Verse:

Verse:

❖ Dislike. "I hate him!"

Verse:

Verse:

❖ Confusion. "I don't know what to say."

Verse:

Verse:

❖ Procrastination. “I’ll do it tomorrow.”

Verse:

Verse:

❖ Apathy. “It’s not that important.”

Verse:

Verse:

❖ Denial. “It’s not my job.”

Verse:

Verse:

PASSION

We are obligated to spread the gospel – it’s not a choice, it’s a command. But this is not a command that we should react to as if someone had just told us to go scrub the toilets ... this is a command we should react to with Passion.

We see this in Romans 10:1 and Romans 9:1-4, which read, “Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.” “I speak the truth in Christ – I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit – I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.”

Paul didn’t treat this command casually ... he passionately wanted to share the gospel with the lost. We see four aspects to his passion:

First, it was his heart’s desire.

Now, this isn’t talking about a “Sure, I want people to come to know the Lord” attitude. This isn’t a casual wish that you make over your birthday cake before you blow out the candles. This is Paul’s single-most fervent desire in his heart. The thing that drove him to get up in the morning and gave purpose to *every* action. The thing he dreamed about. The thing he wanted more than anything else in the world.

- ❖ What are some things that people might classify as their “heart’s desire” – in the church or in the world?

- ❖ What does Paul’s heart’s desire tell you about him, about what kind of person he must have been?

So the salvation of the lost was Paul’s greatest desire. Second, it was his prayer to God.

You get an image here ... Paul just yearning for those who have not received Jesus, on his knees praying his heart out to God for their salvation.

- ❖ Our heart’s desire will always come out in our prayers, so it can be a good exercise to listen to yourself praying ... what are your requests? What do you focus on? What do you bring up most frequently?

- ❖ Why might you find it difficult to imitate Paul in unceasing prayer for the lost?

Sharing the gospel was Paul's heart's desire, his prayer to God, and third, it caused him great sorrow and unceasing anguish.

Go back to that picture of Paul. He's on his knees praying his heart out ... and he's crying. Not just a few tears slipping down his cheeks ... he's sobbing, and his heart is breaking. You can imagine him even crossing his arms over his chest, trying to control the gut-wrenching sobs that are wracking his body.

I have to stop and tell you that this image puts me to shame. Do I feel that way about the lost? Except for occasional moments, I don't think I do ... but I should.

This image of Paul shows us clearly his tenderness of heart. You don't cry for someone else unless you really care about them.

I leave that picture of Paul to you as a challenge as you – and I – examine our own hearts.

❖ How much do you grieve and sorrow for those who are lost?

Finally, it made him wish that he himself were cursed for their sake.

This, beyond the other points, shakes me to the core. Paul is literally saying that he wishes he could go to hell so that other people might be spared that fate. He states that he would be willing to be separated from God and tormented forever, if only the lost could be saved.

Do you love people that much? Could you echo Paul's words? I think I would be hard-pressed to do so ... which shows me that I still have a long way to go in learning to really love the way Jesus loves us.

Because that is, essentially, what Paul is saying here. He is indicating that he shares Christ's love for the lost, to some measure of the degree that Christ infinitely loves us. He knows he can't suffer for anyone else ... but Someone else did. Christ did exactly that: took the punishment so that we could be saved. Paul was so close to Christ's heart that his heart beat in the same pattern – the pattern of self-sacrificing, self-less love for the lost.

His heart's desire. His prayer to God. Thoughts of the lost caused Paul great sorrow and even anguish, and led him to wish that he himself might be accursed if it would mean salvation for them.

- ❖ How do we grow in this kind of love? What can we do to become more like Paul in this matter, as he was like Christ?
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PURPOSE

Next, we move on to Purpose. The gospel is about a Person, is to be shared with People, is driven by Passion and when we share it, it's for one Purpose. And that purpose is found in Romans 10:8-10: "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."

What is the purpose? The purpose of sharing the gospel is the salvation of the hearer. Confession that Jesus is Lord, and belief that his death and resurrection was for you.

Sounds simple, but being fallen people, we can forget even such a simple, obvious truth. People may share for the sake of looking good, counting up numbers of people they have shared with ... Paul even mentions elsewhere that people sometimes preached out of spite itself. But it's important to remember that sharing the gospel isn't an end in itself ... just as you don't scatter seed just for the sake of seeing it lying there on the ground. You scatter seed to get a crop ... you share the gospel to get souls saved.

POWER

Finally, one last point. Sharing the gospel is about a Person, it's to be shared with People, driven by Passion, spoken for a Purpose ... and it brings Power.

Romans 1:16 reads, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile."

Sometimes I think we may forget that sharing the gospel is opening a doorway for God's power to pour forth on people. This isn't a calm and quiet thing; no ordinary, everyday bit of triviality. The gospel contains the power of God.

Remember a few lessons ago, we discussed power. That power is talking about dynamite force in a person's life, to explode the bondage of evil and set a person free to a new life. We saw in that lesson nine "sticks of dynamite" that Paul discussed in Romans chapter 8:

- The power of truth to combat the lies of the devil.
- The power of transformation to renew your mind.
- The power of obedience to live out God's laws.
- The power of the Spirit to live in us.
- The power of guidance to walk in God's will.
- The power of adoption to make us God's children.
- The power of hope to conquer despair.
- The power of prayer to effectively intercede for us.
- The power of love to make us safe and secure.

That's the power that the gospel brings to a person's life ... and the power comes in with atom bomb force with the *power of salvation*.

- ❖ What images might you use to communicate to someone the power of salvation?

- ❖ Personal testimony is often one of the strongest ways to communicate the power of salvation ... telling what has changed and how God's power has been active in your life. What are some of the key points from your testimony?

CONCLUSION

Person, People, Passion, Purpose, Power. Pray that these 5 Ps would be perfectly reflected in your life so that the kingdom of God would go forth!