

“In Christ, We Who Are Many Form One Body”

Sermons on Romans # 31

Texts: Romans 12:3-21; Deuteronomy 32:35-42

We have come to the so-called “practical” section of Romans (chapters 12-15) in which Paul discusses the application of those doctrines set forth in Romans 1-11 to specific situations in everyday life. Paul has spoken of the Christian life as “life in the Spirit.” Now he will show us what life in the Spirit looks like. Paul has told us as justified sinners to reckon ourselves dead to sin but alive to God. Now we will find out how this process of reckoning ourselves dead to sin and alive to God manifests itself in the life of the church.

As we saw last time, in Romans 12:1-2 Paul exhorts the Christians in Rome to renew their minds while at the same time to avoid conformity to the pattern of this present evil age. According to Paul, Christians are to put on the mind of Christ (a fruit of regeneration), while at the same time they must stop thinking and acting like the pagans they once were. This means that there is an intellectual priority in the Christian life. The renewed mind (intellect) leads the way while the heart (emotions) must necessarily follow. But in order to obey the will of God, we must know the will of God. And to know the will of God, we must know God’s word—wherein his perfect will is revealed. And knowing God’s will, we cannot help but offer ourselves as living sacrifices to the God who created us and redeemed us. This, Paul says, is our spiritual act of worship, the response of a renewed mind and a heart filled with gratitude, to what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. This our duty and the sign that sanctification is taking place.

As we work our way through this final section of this epistle, we come to Romans 12:3-16, where Paul discusses the Christian’s attitude toward other Christians, an issue especially important to the church in Rome, where very likely Jewish and Gentile Christians experienced some degree of strife within the church.

The presence of such strife is why Paul lists Christian humility as the first characteristic of the Christian mind which is being transformed by the word of God and which is no longer being conformed to the pattern of this age. In verse 3, Paul writes, “*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.*” While some argue that Paul’s words are aimed at those who hold office in the church—they are not to lord their authority over those they serve—there is no reason to think this is the case. Paul intends this exhortation to be heeded by all Christians, since humility should be the attitude of all those who are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone. People who understand that they are justified only because God has been merciful to them in Jesus Christ are hardly in a position to boast about their own righteousness. If the righteousness which justifies is Christ’s, and if our own righteousness only renders us guilty before God, then how can we boast and think of ourselves as better than others? We cannot.

Paul was graciously called by Jesus Christ to his office as apostle to the Gentiles. His calling was nothing that he had attained through his own efforts. Therefore, Paul is in a position to exhort his readers on to Christian humility. The word translated “I say,” (λέγω—when used with the dative and following

an infinitive) indicates the sense of a command.¹ What Paul “says,” is commanded of “*every one of us*.”

The first thing on Paul’s list of things connected to Christian humility is “*not [to] think of yourself more highly than you ought*.” After the fall of the human race into sin, all of us tend to see life centering around ourselves. Because of the sinful and self-centered orientation of the flesh, we see ourselves as the most important person in the world. Everything God is doing must be seen in light of our own current situation. We evaluate what God is doing in terms of the benefit in it for us. But Paul exhorts us not to do this. The renewed mind realizes that it is human sin which creates this self-centered perspective. Thus we must strive to see ourselves in light of God’s larger purposes, since those purposes inevitably include others. While each one of us have dignity and value because we are created in the *imago Dei* and because we have been redeemed by Christ, nevertheless we must see ourselves “with a proper sense of proportion.”² The world does not center around me!

Rather, we are a part of a larger plan and purpose of God and but a single member of the mystical body of Jesus Christ, a body which is composed of many members. This is why we are to evaluate ourselves with a “sober judgment” which is but another way of saying that we are to evaluate ourselves in a realistic, clear-headed, manner. We do this, says Paul, “*in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you*.” It is only through the eyes of faith that we see that everything we have comes to us from the hand of a merciful God. Only in the light of faith do we realize that we are wicked people who have been justified not by works, but through the merits of Jesus Christ. Once we understand the nature of grace and that our salvation is based upon nothing good in us, how then can we remain proud and think of ourselves more highly than we ought? It does not hurt to remind ourselves every now and then that God is very good at humbling the proud and raising up those who are downcast and disheartened.

At this point in Romans, Paul sets out the notion that the church is the mystical body of Jesus Christ, a very prominent theme elsewhere in Paul’s writings. In 1 Corinthians 10:17, while discussing the Lord’s Supper, Paul puts it this way: “*Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf*.” In 1 Corinthians 12:12-30, Paul speaks of this matter in more detail—there are many parts but one body, that God arranges the parts as he sees fit, the weaker members of the body are indispensable to the well-being of the body as a whole and that there should be no divisions within the body of Christ. In Ephesians 1:23, Paul speaks of the church as “*his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way*.”³ In Colossians 1:18, Paul speaks of Christ as “*the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy*.”⁴ In Romans 12, Paul speaks of the church as the body of Christ almost in passing, and this is a point he develops more fully in epistles written later such as the two Corinthians letters.

In verses 4-5, Paul sets forth image of the body of Christ in a very basic form. “*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*.” True humility stems from the fact

¹ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 437, n. 26.

² Cited in Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 437.

³ The same theme appears in Ephesians 4:4-16 and 5:23-30.

⁴ The same language is used in Colossians 1:24; 2:19 and 3:15.

that having been saved by Christ and united to Jesus Christ through faith we must not overlook the obvious. God does not save us as isolated individuals with individual destinies. Having been united to Jesus Christ, we are members of Christ's body (his church), and we now serve the whole community through our unique gifts and abilities, just as the different parts of our bodies serve the whole person.

But Jesus Christ is the head of his body, so we must all submit to the Savior. This is the very essence of the humility Paul is describing. Since no part of the body still functions if severed from the whole, each Christian believer is useless if not an active part of the body. For Paul, there is no such thing as a Christian who is not also a member of the body (the church). The application from this is obvious. While we are personally justified by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone, we are not justified in isolation from other members of Christ's church. We are called from death to life to be part of a larger body—Christ's. We cannot exist independently of that body. Each member contributes something vital—even if it appears to be insignificant. Each member belongs to whole and is equally important to the well-being of Christ's church.

Paul cannot not envision any Christian believer existing independently of the church as is common in modern America. The public assembly of the body of Christ for worship and to receive God's word and sacraments (the local manifestation of the universal church) is essential to the Christian life, and is a testimony to those around us that God is creating a new society in which racial and social barriers are removed, and where each member not only contributes to the whole, but each member benefits from the contributions of others. Given the organic nature of the church, the body analogy is a very apt and fitting way to speak of the church and our relation to it, as we submit to our mutual head, who is Christ.

Closely connected to the image of the body is the idea that each member of the body has different gifts. While Paul is fond of speaking of the church as the mystical body of Jesus Christ, he also lists the so-called "gifts of the Spirit" (*charismata*) in a number of texts. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 28-30; Ephesians 4:7-11 (as well as 1 Corinthians 14), Paul enumerates those gifts given by God to individual members of the church for equipping of the saints and the edification of the church. In Romans 12, Paul's point is simply "that different members of the church have different gifts, all of which have their place. Each should use whatever gift he has to the full."⁵ Thus in the first part of verse 6, Paul simply tells us, "*we have different gifts, according to the grace given us.*"

While Paul does say that these gifts come to us from God, he never really answers the question as to whether or not these are natural abilities given to us at birth, or whether or not they are supernatural endowments given us at conversion or at ordination, or even whether they are a combination thereof. It is probably a combination of natural and supernatural gifts which the apostle has in mind. But whatever the case, these gifts have been given to us by grace. This simply means that we cannot be something that we are not, nor because some might have more visible gifts, they are more important than those who exercise their gifts privately.

While the question, "how do we know whether we have certain gifts or not," takes us off our subject, it is an important question, to which we will try and give a brief answer. Such graciously given gifts and personal interests usually go hand in hand. It is not very likely that God has called you to be a missionary in the jungles of South America, if you hate the very thought of going to South America! It is not very likely that God has called you to a ministry of mercy if you don't see such needs in others.

⁵ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 438.

Those called to the mission field usually can't wait to get there. Those called to help the poor and the needy see such needs and feel compelled to do something about it whenever they notice someone suffering. Those called to teach and preach are never satisfied unless they are teaching and preaching. Thus God's call, the giving of supernatural gifts and natural abilities and our personal interests are all tied together.

The recognition of a desire to serve is what is known as an internal call. In the Reformed tradition there is an external call as well. In this case the church recognizes these gifts in certain individuals, and formally calls them, commissions them, appoints them, and where appropriate ordains them, to perform the tasks to which individuals feel called. This is a way of testing and approving the internal call and gives people a proper context in which their gifts can be used most profitably.

Ultimately, Paul's point is a very simple one. Christians are to use the gifts that God has given to them in the church for the edification of others and for the greater glory and purpose of God. Thus Paul can say in verses 6-8, "*If a man's gift is prophesying, (preaching) 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.*" The whole subject of spiritual gifts is not nearly as complicated as so many seem to have made it. The questions we should ask are, "what do you like doing?" "What are you good at doing?" Then the church should find places for people to "just do it!"

In verses 9-10, Paul's focus shifts to a related matter. Since we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, and since we are called by Christ to become part of his body, then, we are to have a special regard for those who have been likewise chosen, called, justified and included with Christ, irregardless of social or cultural things which may divide us. Paul puts it this way in verses 9-10: "*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.*"

Paul's doctrine of love for fellow members of the body of Christ is not a sentimental one. It is not about external and shallow displays of affection—although it is hard to imagine a Rabbi like Paul not bear-hugging fellow believers and kissing them on both cheeks. Paul's doctrine of love is centered in action. Love for the brethren results in acts of charity, hospitality and mercy. Such love is to be sincere, not feigned. Such love hates evil, it clings to what is good. It, therefore, involves truth and honesty. At times, it means speaking the truth in love even if such is not easy to do. At other times, it means shutting up, even when we know we are right. This is Paul's point about the need for constant renewal of the mind according to the word of God so as to discern the will of God. There are times when people are more important than principle and there are time when principle is far are more important than people's feelings. It is only divine wisdom—which comes through the word, through godly counsel, or through old fashioned common sense—that enables us to know when people or principle are more important.

But Paul does say that we are to devote ourselves to discerning such things, and we do it aright when we honor others more highly than ourselves. Furthermore, Paul will tolerate no begrudging, half-hearted effort. As he puts it in verse 11, "*Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.*" Literally, the first clause in the text reads something like "in zeal, do not be lazy."⁶ The question remains, however, "zealous for what?" In context, Paul mostly likely means zealous for the kind of

⁶ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 778.

spiritual act of worship associated with offering one's body as a spiritual sacrifice, and this is linked to the preceding exhortation that we must be devoted to each other in brotherly love (v. 10).

The phrase "keep up your spiritual fervor," is probably a reference to a strong emotional effort made by the believer. This clause could be rendered, "be set on fire [boil, seethe] by the Spirit."⁷ Although such emotional fervor can be abused, it is nevertheless connected to the renewing of the mind and the zeal which results. This fits with the point we have already been making. Genuine love manifests itself in action, not in shallow or self-centered displays of emotion. Furthermore, such zeal comes about through the constant renewal of the mind which in turn comes from the Word and through the Sacraments, which is the foundation for proper action. The renewed mind manifests itself when what we believe about God, our neighbors and ourselves, is translated into the actions now enumerated in verses 12-13. "*Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*" Paul's doctrine of hope (v. 12) is thoroughly eschatological, as we have seen in our discussion of Romans 8:18-27. Knowing the goal to which we are headed, and knowing what lies ahead in terms of the resurrection and eternal life, gives us joy (not happiness), patience in affliction (God can and will turn evil to good) and faithful (regular) prayer. Indeed, we long to see God's will being done on earth as it is in heaven. After all, Jesus has commanded us to pray for these very things!

Christian zeal manifests itself in concrete action, sharing with people in need (food, clothing, shelter), practicing hospitality, which reflects the fact that in Paul's day it was vital to give travelers shelter, food and provision for their animals (hay and water). The application for us is that we are to be especially concerned about the welfare of our brothers and sisters in Christ, who may be traveling or new to the area and who stop in our communities. But notice that Paul puts this in the "imperative" mood—we are to seek such people out and welcome them into our community.

But in verse 14, there is change in subject from Christians to non-Christians, a point which will be fleshed out in more detail in verses 17-21. "*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*" Paul's point is the same, genuine love manifests itself in action. But now Paul extends this command beyond the church to those outside the church. It is easy to forget that in Paul's day, Christians were often ostracized socially and economically. Therefore, a Christian is to respond to persecution by demonstrating the love of Christ to the persecutor, not hatred nor retribution. We bless those who curse us, we do not curse back! Some commentators believe that Paul's words are a combination of Matthew 5:44, "*Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*" and Luke 6:27-28, "*Love your enemies,*

⁷ "The idea of 'zeal' is continued in the image of 'being set on fire' in the second exhortation, Paul might be here urging Christians to maintain a strong and emotional commitment to the Lord in their own spirits. But the spirit to which Paul refers is more likely, in light of the parallel reference to the Lord in 11c, the Holy Spirit. On this view, Paul is exhorting us to allow the Holy Spirit to 'set us on fire,' to open ourselves to the Spirit as he seeks to excite us about the 'rational worship' to which the Lord has called us. . . The encouragement to be 'set on fire by the Spirit' is, as church history and current experience amply attest, open to abuse. Christians have often been so carried away by enthusiasm for spiritual things that they have left behind those objective standards of Christian living that the Scriptures set forth. This, it seems, is Paul's concern; and he seeks to cut off any such abuses by reminding us that being set on fire by the Spirit, must lead to, and be directed by, our service of the Lord. It is not the 'enthusiasm' of self-centered display . . . but the enthusiasm of humble service of the master who bought us that the Spirit creates within us. Cf. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 778-779.

*do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*⁸ If true, this means that Paul was able to draw upon a body of Jesus' sayings which were memorized and widely known in the early church.

In verses 15-16, Paul returns to the ways in which brotherly love is manifest. *“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”* This means that we identify with people in their joys and sorrows. We laugh with our brothers and sisters when its time to laugh. We join in the toasts at weddings, birthdays, and retirement parties. We shed tears with our brothers and sisters in times of sorrow. When they mourn, we mourn with them.

Furthermore, Paul exhorts Christians to live in peace with each other. The members of the spiritual body of Christ, despite their great social and cultural diversity, must seek to live in harmony with each other. This entails three specific things: One is that we are not to be proud and think of ourselves more highly than we ought, (v. 3), and honor others above ourselves, (v. 10). Two, we are to be willing to associate with people of low position. There are to be no class distinctions whatsoever within Christ's church. God's new society does not have Jews, Greeks, slaves, free, male or female. Three, we are not to be conceited or arrogant. Literally, Paul says, we are to be characterized by “wise thinking” (wisdom defined by the Scriptures) not by self-thinking, (arrogance).

Finally, we now turn to verses 17-21 where we find Paul's discussion of the Christian's attitude toward non-Christians.

As Paul has already stated in verse 14, the command for Christians to love others extends beyond the boundaries of the church. In verses 17-21, the apostle returns to the point he made in verse 14, but now fleshes out its meaning in more detail. Again, we cannot forget the context in which Paul writes, which is the situation faced by Christians in the city of Rome. Christians were increasingly being persecuted and ostracized from much of Roman society. As the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul must now instruct these Christian as to how to live in the face of this increasing persecution. There are a number of imperatives which follow, all of which are very straightforward. *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”*

Paul is very concerned about the church's witness to the world, especially in a missionary context. Once again, there are loud echoes in these words which come directly from the teaching of Jesus in the sermon on the mount—*“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also”* (Matthew 5:38-39). Paul restates Jesus' words (do not repay evil for evil) and reaffirms them as binding for Christians.⁹ When Paul speaks of *“doing what is right in the eyes of everybody,”* he is not saying that Christians can do what is right in their own eyes (cf. Exodus 15:26). Nor is the apostle saying that

⁸ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 781.

⁹ This is the teaching not only of Jesus, but of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 5:15—*“Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else”* and Peter in 1 Peter 3:9—*“Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.”*

Christians can do things that non-Christians find acceptable but which are contrary to the will of God. Rather, we should take Paul to mean that we are to do those things which Christians and non-Christians agree upon (the so-called “first” or “civil use”) of the law as a means of establishing common ground with them. By doing this, Christians deflect undue criticism that they are a danger to the state.

In verse 18, Paul again reminds us how Christian love is to manifest itself in action—*“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”* Paul, of all people, realizes that the gospel of Jesus Christ is offensive to unbelievers. He does not want Christians to be offensive to unbelievers because of their behavior! Let the gospel offend people because of its truth. But we are to live at peace with all people whenever possible.

In light of this increasing persecution, in verse 19 Paul reminds us of who it is that is our protector and why we can be confident that all wrongs will be righted! *“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.”* Citing from Deuteronomy 32:35, Paul’s eschatological categories come into view again. Believers must not be preoccupied with getting even with those who have wronged them. Rather, God will avenge his people at the end of the age, when all those who persecute the church of Jesus Christ will face the Lord of the church. God can do far more to them than we can! Furthermore, he judges with the true and with righteousness. We do not, and indeed cannot make such judgments! So we leave such things to God.

Because it is God’s place to dispense judgment, not ours, we must act as follows: *“On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* It is fascinating to think that by doing good towards our enemies when they persecute us—the right things which are the product of a renewed mind—we actually make the non-Christian’s situation worse. By repaying evil with good, by giving them food and drink, we remove whatever reason they may have for hating us. It doesn’t necessarily mean that they will stop, but hopefully, through our actions, they will become ashamed of their conduct towards us and our actions may drive them to repentance, something implied by the image of hot coals being heaped upon them, taken from Proverbs 25:21-22.

Beloved as our minds are renewed and our hearts are filled with gratitude for what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, let us evaluate ourselves with a sober judgment and with the eyes of faith. Since we are all sinners, there is no reason to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. And yet, at the same time, God has placed each one of us with our different gifts into the one body of Jesus Christ. We are one. We have a mutual purpose, although we have many different gifts. Therefore let us use our gifts for the edification of others. Let our love for one another take the form of action as Paul has described. Let us regard others above ourselves. Let us hate that which is evil while at the same time, not return evil for evil. Let us rejoice with each other in times of joy. Let us mourn with those who mourn. Let us share with those who are in need and after we have done so, reach out in mercy to those outside our church.

We who are many form one body in Jesus Christ. Because we have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb, we are part of the body of Jesus Christ, and even as nothing can separate us from the love of Christ, let his love for us spill out from us to each other. Let us serve our master and each other cheerfully and in love. For such love is the fruit of a renewed mind and is unlike anything this world knows or understands. And so let this be our testimony to those outside the church, that Jesus loves us, has given himself for us, and has claimed us as his own. For in Christ, we who are many are one.