

GOD WITH US

Part 10: EARLY LETTERS

Messages 16-20 – Romans

Life on the Altar

Romans 12-16

Introduction

Most of Paul's letters can be divided into two basic sections: one giving us truth about what God has done for us, followed by a section on how we should respond by living our lives for God. Romans 1-9 is the doctrinal section of the letter. Romans 12-16 is the practical section. As you study Romans 12-16 you will see Paul moving through different topics related to Christian living. The way we live is our response to God's amazing grace. Obedience is the "Thank You" card that we send to God every day of our lives.

A Living Sacrifice: 12:1,2

"And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect" (12:1,2).

Notice the phrase: *"because of all He has done for you"* (12:1). We should present our entire lives as living sacrifices to Him because of all He has done for us. God has already provided for us a dying sacrifice – the death of Jesus His Son. Thus, He invites us to LIVE for Him, to give our lives to be used for His purposes . . . all in response to His great love and sacrifice for us.

Who really owns my life? If your life is laid out on the altar, if you are a living sacrifice, you will make good progress on all the little details in your walk with Christ. On the other hand, if you are in charge, if you are not on the altar of total commitment, you will always be hindered in your obedience. You will never mature as a Christian, without the altar. Have you fully surrendered your life to the Lordship of Christ?

What we do with our MINDS has a big impact on our spiritual growth (12:2). God wants to transform us by rearranging our minds.

This means we need to spend significant time allowing God’s Word to go deep into our heads. God uses His Word to change us and grow us. As you allow God to rearrange your mind, then “*you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*”

Use your Spiritual Gifts: 12:3-5

“In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly (12:6-8).

If your life is submitted to Jesus as Lord, you will be eager and persistent in discovering and deploying your God-given spiritual gifts in the service of your King. Paul only mentions a few “spiritual gifts” in this passage. (See also Ephesians 4, 1Peter 4 and 1Corinthians 12 for fuller gift lists.)

Christian Character: 12:9-21

Paul gives us an extended description of how a Christian should live. Similar “virtue lists” are found in most of Paul’s letters. These lists are helpful tools to evaluate how you are doing as a Christ-follower. God wants to grow us up to make us look more like Jesus Christ. Thus, our *character* is of utmost importance to God. Paul devotes special attention to the issue of *revenge* (12:17-21). We should make every effort to be at peace with others, never seeking to “get even” or “take revenge.” We should overcome evil with good.

Is there someone you are trying to get even with? Do your very best to make peace with that person. Then, having done all you can do, give the situation over to God. Finally, seek ways to be a blessing to the one who has hurt you. This is Paul’s admonition to us as we face conflicts in life. Repaying evil with good is part of our testimony.

The Christian and Governing Authorities: 13:1-7

We learn several important things about human governments in this passage. 1) ALL governing authorities “*have been placed there by God.*” Yes, even the bad ones. The Roman emperors called

themselves ‘gods,’ and demanded allegiance from all their subjects. Yet, Paul said that ALL governing authorities, even the bad ones, have been given their seat of authority by God. 2) Christians should live in submission to governing authorities, for in so doing they are living out their submission to God. Our submission is an outward expression of our loyalty to Christ, our King. 3) The preservation of civility and peace for citizens is a God-ordained role for human governments. 4) Christians should pay their taxes, since governing authorities need to earn a living. 5) Christians should maintain an attitude of honor and respect for governing authorities.

Of course, there were occasions when authorities would ask the Christian to do something *directly contrary* to God’s Word. When commanded by the Jerusalem authorities to stop talking about Jesus, the apostles gave this simple reply: **“We must obey God rather than men”** (*Acts 5:29 – see also Acts 4:19,20*).

The Christian and Love: 13:8-10

Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another. If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law. For the commandments say, “You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet.” These—and other such commandments—are summed up in this one commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God’s law.

*Unconditional love . . . without partiality. This is the counter culture kind of love that Christians are called to bring to their world. Love in spite of, not love because of. And this love is to be expressed to all people, not just to certain people whom we can love with ease. Paul wrote: **If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God’s law.** For a Christian, it shouldn’t matter if the person you love is a stranger or your friend, if they are from nearby or far off, if they are black or white . . . **OUR LOVE SHOULD BE COUNTER CULTURE.** When it is . . . it is a very beautiful thing to experience and a clear indicator that we are followers of Jesus.*

The Christian and Morality: 13:11-14

Roman culture was not much different than our modern culture. As you can see from this passage, there were wild parties going on with plenty of sex and substances! These parties were not restricted to the elite, otherwise Paul would not be telling ordinary Roman Christians to refrain from participating. Forms of immoral living

were available at all levels of society. Then and now, Christians need to live with eyes wide open to temptation.

The Christian and Disputable Matters: 14:1-23

The issues Paul deals with here – clean versus unclean foods, holy versus ordinary days – are sometimes called “grey issues.” In other words, they are not “black and white”, right and wrong issues. These are practices/lifestyle choices where Jesus have given us liberty. Yet, for some Christians, the conscience still feels guilt when it comes to these grey areas. Though “free from the Law,” some feel as if they are still under the Law. Therefore, participating in these activities brings a degree of shame and guilt that can hinder a person’s relationship with Christ.

Jewish Christians had come from a background filled with religious laws, duties and regulations. Certain foods were ‘unholy’ while other foods were clean. Gentile Christians did not have this same rulebook orientation in their backgrounds. So, when they became Christians, they typically felt much more freedom in their hearts to enjoy all kinds of foods, with no hint of guilt because of past associations with “holy” and “unholy” foods.

A key to understanding how Christians are to live in harmony on such ‘grey’ issues is the idea that we are all, ultimately, going to stand before GOD and answer for our lifestyle choices. We do not need to judge one another in such matters, since judging is God’s role. Another key to living in harmony is walking in LOVE. If I feel a sense of liberty to participate in a certain activity, and yet I know that my participation will cause another brother or sister to stumble (to be hindered in their spiritual progress because they follow my example and end up feeling condemned in their own mind), then I should be guided by THE LAW OF LOVE rather than THE LAW OF LIBERTY. My ‘freedom’ in this case is the freedom to love my brother, rather than the freedom to exercise my liberty. My ‘freedom’ is the freedom to be unselfish (even though I know in my own heart and mind that my participation is not wrong in God’s eyes). By allowing my LIBERTY to be governed by LOVE for my brother/sister, I am honoring Jesus by honoring His work in another person’s life. I am helping that other person refrain from sinning against his/her own conscience.

St. Augustine summarized well the issues discussed in Romans 14. In ESSENTIALS, unity. In NON-ESSENTIALS, liberty. In ALL-THINGS, charity.

Paul and his future plans: 15:1-33

Each of the three major sections in this chapter ends with a prayer from Paul. Such prayers were common in Paul's writings. They often combine a prayer to God with an exhortation (wish) to the Christians. Here are those three prayers in Romans 15.

“Now may the God of perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus; that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:5,6).

“Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit” (15:13).

“Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen” (15:33).

- Use your strength to build up the weak. 15:1-6

Verse 1 literally reads like this: *“We who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those who are not strong . . .”*. Paul reminds them that there are many in the body of Christ who are *“without strength”* for one reason or another. The issue of *“weakness”* here is broader than the *“weakness”* issue in chapter 14. In chapter 14 it was a doctrinal sort of weakness, a tie to past rules that no longer bind us. In chapter 15, Paul is referring to *any* form of weakness that leaves one devoid of strength. He calls those who are strong to help carry the weak. A similar admonition comes near the end of Paul's letter to the Galatian church: *“Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2)*. This is a primary duty we have toward one another in the family of God. The strong must come to the aid of those without strength. Paul points to Jesus, our example in this regard.

Is there someone near you who is weak and in need of your help to make it through a difficult time? Look around you and ask God to show you if there is someone you need to come alongside of to help carry them through. Ask God to give you the strength to help bear their burden until they can regain strength and stand again. When you do this for a brother or sister, you are fulfilling the law of love that Jesus gave to us as His followers.

- Accept one another for God's glory. 15:7-13

Jew and Gentile in the body of Christ . . . *together!* We can hardly imagine how difficult that was for the early Christians to pull off. Jews and Gentiles had been strongly divided for centuries by very high ethnic, religious and cultural walls. Now, in the course of a few years, those walls had been pulled down by Jesus . . . resulting in Jew and Gentile merging into one new 'family.' Paul used several Old Testament quotes in this section to show that God intended all along to wed Jew and Gentile into one new family.

- Move the gospel forward. 15:14-24

Paul gets personal here as he writes about his past ministry accomplishments among the Gentiles. He has preached Christ "*from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum.*" Illyricum was the Roman Province just east of Italy, so Paul was saying that he had essentially covered the entire eastern portion of the Roman world with the message of Christ! What an accomplishment!

- Share your resources with the needy. 15:25-29

As Paul was preparing to go to Rome, he had to make one very important stop *in the other direction.* He must go back to Jerusalem to take a tangible expression of love from the Gentile churches to the primarily Jewish-Christian Church in Palestine. *Paul's plan* was threefold: 1) Go to Jerusalem and present the church there with a large financial gift from the Gentile churches. 2) Go directly from Jerusalem to Rome. 3) Go all the way west to Spain after visiting Rome. *God's plan* for Paul was very different.

- Pray about all of your plans. 15:30-33

Paul's final request in this chapter was for PRAYER as he sought to take risks for the mission to the world. His specific prayer was that he would be rescued from those in Judea who wished to harm him, and that he could make it to Rome "with a joyful heart." God does not always answer our prayers just the way we would like Him to. Paul was arrested and imprisoned in Judea by those who opposed the gospel. He was held in prison for several years. When he finally did journey to Rome, he was a prisoner . . . and the ship crashed at sea. He was stranded with the other passengers on the Island of Malta . . . where he was bitten by a poisonous snake! Finally, after many, many trials, Paul made it to Rome. The will of God rarely plays out as we envision it!

Paul Greets Friends: 16:1-27

The final chapter of Romans is unusual in that it is the longest list of Paul's friends, to whom he sends greetings. It reveals the extent to which relationships were important to Paul. It also specifically highlights the role of women in the life and ministry of Paul.

Comments from Shirley on Women in Romans 16

Paul is sometimes portrayed as a 'male-chauvinist' with negative attitudes toward women. This is derived from sections in letters where he teaches the role and behavior of women. In the 21st Century, some of those directives in specific letters seem offensive, and cause women to conclude that he was biased. On the contrary, Romans 16 shows how much he valued and respected women. He affirmed their roles in his personal life, in the mission of spreading the "Good News" of Jesus Christ, supporting the ministry, educating the believers, providing their homes for the house-churches, serving the believers, being his 'spiritual mom' and many other ways "they worked hard for the Lord," even carrying this most significant letter to Rome.

Of the 28 people that Paul identified, 10 WERE WOMEN! In his estimation, women were equal co-workers, sisters in the Lord, and true examples to the believers of devotion to Christ and to His Church. Let's look at 4 of these important women.

PHOEBE (16:1,2) was shining example of a woman who fulfilled Paul's admonition to remain SINGLE if possible (1Cor. 7:34), because whether male or female, being single allows more time, energy and flexibility to serve the Lord. Paul affirmed her as "his own SISTER", and introduced her to the Christians in Rome as "their sister." She was a SERVANT or DEACONNESS, performing some kind of servant-leadership role in her fellowship. She could have been an early convert who became a leader of the house church in Cenchrea, a Port on the outskirts of Corinth (where Paul had a significant ministry). She may have used her own home to host the meetings. She is called a PATRON (benefactor, supporter, sponsor, defender or guardian). She supported Paul and many others either through her income as

a single woman, or from an inheritance. She knew she was “a steward of God’s resources,” not “an owner”, and she shared them with an open hand. Phoebe was TRUSTWORTHY. Paul entrusted her to deliver his most comprehensive letter to the church in Rome. Finally, Paul wanted the people who received her in Rome to recognize her value in his eyes, and to HONOR her with respect, and care for her needs as she had cared for the needs of himself and many others, “worthy of the saints”.

PRISCILLA (PRISCA) (16:3-5), the wife of Aquila, was a PARTNER with her husband in life and ministry. They are mentioned 6 times in the N.T. There was no mention of children, which gave them more freedom to be CO-LABORERS with Paul, available to move around the Roman Empire. Priscilla is mostly mentioned 1st before Aquila. Her PROMINENCE in the ministry was probably due to her knowledge of the Word, and skills in ministry and hospitality, yet she didn’t cause her husband or Paul or Apollos to feel inferior. This couple met and worked with Paul in Corinth (Acts 18). They later led a HOUSE CHURCH in Ephesus, and MENTORED a young, gifted leader named Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). Later in life, they hosted a house church in Rome. In Romans 16, Paul called them “MY FELLOW WORKERS who for my life, RISKED THEIR OWN NECKS (lives). This devoted couple was well known throughout the Roman Empire as co-laborers and partners in life and ministry. Priscilla was a woman who DIDN’T WASTE HER OPPORTUNITY that not bearing children brought. Not having children would have probably caused her disappointment and, at times, public questions; but she chose to be used by God to partner with her husband in their business as tent-makers, and to raise up ‘spiritual children’ throughout the Roman Empire instead. They were encouragers and co-laborers with Paul, blessing all the churches.

JUNIA (16:7) is greeted along with Andronicus, both of whom were LONG-STANDING CHRISTIANS, having come to faith in Christ before Paul. It is not clear if Junia was single or if she was married to Andronicus. Paul calls them HIS RELATIVES or KIN. Perhaps they were from his Jewish tribe of Benjamin, or actual relatives, or just Jews like he was.

“They are OUTSTANDING AMONG THE APOSTLES.” Junia was a woman of high, “out-standing” reputation. This means that her CONTRIBUTION was highly significant among those who took the message of Christ to the world. The title “APOSTLE” has a narrow definition, and also a broad definition. In either case it denotes “the sent ones.” Junia was ranked among those who were sent out as MESSENGERS, carrying the gospel of Jesus Christ in those early, dangerous and courageous years. Paul notes, they “have been IN PRISON with me.” Junia was not ashamed of the gospel, but was willing to suffer with Paul and be imprisoned with him. Paul had deep respect for both Andronicus and Junia, and wanted the believers in Rome to know how important they were to the mission of Jesus, courageously staying by his side even in the most difficult times.

THE MOTHER OF RUFUS & ME (16:13). Rufus is mentioned along with his brother Alexander, as the sons of Simon, the man who was commanded to carry Jesus’ cross (Mark 15:21). Rufus and his mother lived in Rome at the writing of Paul’s letter. Rufus’ mother is never named; yet HER IMPACT AS A MOTHER OF 2 SONS who are named, inspires moms to be faithful to teach their children about Jesus Christ. Beyond her biological sons, she had reached out to be a “MOTHER” to PAUL as well. It is a great privilege (and responsibility) in the ‘family of God’ to be a spiritual mother or father to those who are younger. Paul was deeply grateful and endeared to Rufus’ mother, who SHARED HER LOVE AND NURTURE TO HIM as if she was one of her own sons. Even this comment helps us grasp some of Paul’s heart for older women, and that he vulnerably shared how he had benefitted from her motherly love.

Paul put 10 women on display in Romans 16 for their faithful devotion to Christ and to people. Regardless of their situation, they were affirmed as women who used their lives for the glory of God in their own ways, even risking their lives and going to prison! May we be willing to follow their example by faith, for the sake of Christ, His mission and for people of all ages and walks of life.

A few other interesting notes: Tryphena and Tryphosa were sisters, probably twins. Their names mean “dainty” and “delicate,” yet, they are described as “the Lord’s workers. **Epenetus, Ampliatus and Stachys** are simply called “beloved.” Scholars have found inscriptions from the Emperor’s household that include these names as Imperial slaves. It didn’t really matter who you were or where you lived for Paul. What mattered was your passion to know Christ and to make Christ known. **The house-church leaders.** The “Church” in Rome was, in reality, composed of a large number of these house churches scattered throughout the city. This meant that quality leaders were needed to shepherd these groups of believers. Finally, Paul allows those with him to send along their greetings: **Timothy**, Paul’s very beloved spiritual son. **Tertius** was Paul’s secretary, and the composer of the book of Romans. **Gaius** was Paul’s beloved host during his stay in Corinth. **Erastus** was the city treasurer. **Quartus** was yet another beloved brother.