

**Romans 12:9-21****Matthew 16:21-end****Introduction**

The thing about Paul's writing, as I mentioned last week is that it is very condensed and very complex. It would be possible to preach at least three sermons from our passage last week and in many ways my sermon only scratched the surface. So what I want to do this morning is to look again at the whole of chapter 12 and try to understand what Paul is wanting us, as Jesus' disciples, to know and to put into action in our own lives.

I remember, as a child, when I was due to go to a party or a play day with a friend, before I left my mother would give me a list of instructions which included such pearls of wisdom as: "Don't forget to thank your host when you leave," "Don't take the last piece of food from a plate" "Eat everything you are given" "Say please and thank you" In some ways these are random instructions but they spring from a philosophy which was the foundation of our family life. In our family there was a certain understanding of respect and care for others, of holding back to allow others to benefit and to show gratitude. My mother didn't need to remind me of that she just wanted to make sure I put the philosophy into action in the way I behaved when she wasn't there to prompt me; this is very much what Paul is doing in this chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome.

As I said last week he has spent the first half of his letter is a complex explanation of the nature of sin and judgement and salvation which culminates in a song of praise and leads on to a plea to his hearers to offer themselves completely to God and reinforces this with a list of instructions or Maxims that should rule the Christian life.

So, today I'd like to unpick this a little further. He starts the chapter by saying this:

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. <sup>2</sup> Do not conform 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.*

Which is at the heart of the matter: In response to the astonishing love of God shown to us through Jesus Christ who gave himself totally for us Paul is urging his hearers to respond by giving their bodies, by which he means their whole selves to God as a living sacrifice. This is a sharp contrast to the sacrifice of dead animals in the Old Testament Jewish worship system. He is urging his hearers to give everything that they are to serving God and that their whole lives should be an offering to Him.

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I still vividly remember the moment nearly 50 years ago now when I realized the depth of God's love for me and the fact that Jesus had willingly gone to the cross for me so that I could have a close loving relationship with my creator and that the burden of guilt and failure could be lifted from my shoulders. I was absolutely overwhelmed and I still clearly remember responding joyfully and willingly and saying to him – "as you have given your life for me I will give my life to you!" At the time, for me that meant that I would probably be a missionary in Africa – and of course things never work out as we plan them but the same principle applies. My life belongs to God and I willingly serve him – though there are times when I am distracted which is why Paul urges his listeners.

*"<sup>2</sup> Do not conform 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."*

This has to be a daily commitment – and sometimes I am better at it than at others. The world around us exerts a tremendous pull on our lives. It colours our thinking and our standards – and we often don't even notice that it is doing so. We can develop the worldly thinking that money and possessions are the most important thing in life because we need security, we can put worldly success above the needs of those we love, we can adopt perceived wisdom and take on the thinking of the current age, but Paul tells us that we need to allow God to transform our minds so that we don't conform but live in a way that is pleasing to God.

The whole basis of this, according to Paul, is in sincere love. Love should not just be something we 'do' because we are Christians but it should flow from a heart that is filled by God's Spirit and whose nature is to simply love others.

Dr Robert Seizer, in his book 'Mortal Lessons: Notes in the art of surgery,' tells a remarkable story of performing surgery to remove a tumour in which it was necessary to sever a facial nerve leaving a young woman's mouth twisted in palsy. In Dr Seizer's own words; "Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to dwell in the evening lamplight, isolated from me, private. 'Who are they' I ask myself, he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at each other and touch each other so generously, greedily?' The young woman spoke, 'Will my mouth always be like this?' she asks. 'Yes' I say, 'it will. It is because the nerve was cut.' She nods, and is silent. Then the young man smiles. 'I like it' he says. 'It is kind of cute'. All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with God. Unmindful he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I, so close, can see how he twists his lips to accommodate to hers, to show her that their kiss still works."

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This is what Paul means when he says, <sup>9</sup> *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.* <sup>10</sup> *Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.* "

When we allow the transformation of our hearts and minds by God's Holy Spirit we are able to be devoted to one another in love and honour others more than ourselves. The Christian heart is the one that thinks first and more highly of others, automatically cares for them in love and puts their interests ahead of their own. Where our own love fails we are dependent on God's love in us to give others the love they need and deserve.

The obvious outworking of this, according to Paul, is:

*"Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you."*

And for him the outworking of this is that we should live in harmony with each other

<sup>13</sup> *Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

<sup>16</sup> *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position* <sup>c</sup> *Do not be conceited."*

It is interesting that Paul feels he needs to say these things to Christians. But he does so in more than one of his letters – and often when he talks about the gifts God gives us in order to build up his body, the church, he puts it in the context of love and of honouring others before ourselves. His most famous exposition of love comes in 1 Corinthians immediately after a discussion about the Gifts of The Spirit. In fact when I think back over my years of ministry one of the most frequently recurring problems that I have been faced with is the behavior of Christians in the church towards each other. So often I have found petty squabbles, back biting, jealousy, affront due someone has felt slighted marring the harmony of fellowship and this is what Paul is concerned with here.

For him it is vital that the Christian community is one that is built on love and respect and that is because together we form Christ's body here on earth and our role is to show God's love and mercy in the world. If we are unable to do it in our own Christian communities how can we begin to do it in a hostile and pagan world?

He says,

<sup>4</sup> *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function,* <sup>5</sup> *so in Christ we, though*

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*many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; <sup>7</sup> if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; <sup>8</sup> if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead,<sup>[b]</sup> do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.*

Paul's message is that as we are transformed by God's Holy Spirit he gives us all gifts in order to serve him. The gifts are varied and some very different from others, some are more obviously 'Spiritual' and some are more obviously 'practical'. All these gifts are needed for a Christian community to function properly. In the same way that all the organs and members of a human body have to be functioning well in order for the body to be healthy the members of the body of the church need to be exercising their gifts and sharing together.

Returning to his theme:

*<sup>5</sup> so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. <sup>6</sup> We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. – and to paraphrase,- exercise your own particular gift in accordance with you faith;*

Paul exhorts his hearers:

*<sup>13</sup> Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.<sup>[c]</sup> Do not be conceited.*

As Christians we are called to be Christ's body here on earth. We are here to offer our whole selves to him: body mind and spirit and we are to serve him joyfully. He calls us to love as he has loved us and to express that love in our life together and in our communities and work places.

Silence for reflection

Prayer