

Prayer

Glorious and powerful God, we praise You for the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. You have given life to Your Son, and through Him, life to us all. Your graciousness is far more than we could have asked or dreamt! We honour You and worship You with joy and great happiness; rekindle this joy within us each hour of this day and each day of our lives. May we live as Your people, full of resurrection joy! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Contact a long lost friend and find out about how they are doing. Make this person the subject of your prayers for a period of time, as you judge appropriate

On-going prayers

- **Pray for Christian who live under oppression:** Pray for Christians who are oppressed by the secular world, in some places more acutely than in others
- Continue to pray for Libya especially for peoples who have been oppressed and now long for the freedoms we now enjoy elsewhere in the world
- Give thanks to God for the beauty of life and the many good things you enjoy in life

Meditation

All praise to You God of power and of might;
You have raised Jesus Christ from the dead!

The evils of this world have been overcome;
And love is more powerful than hate!

Death is not the end for those who love Christ;
And mortality is the casualty of the Gospel!

The evil that battered the Kingdom has failed;
And Jesus is victorious forever!

The law has done its work and exposed all sin;
And a new work of grace has begun!

Satan has attempted to prevent God's triumph,
And His power has now been shattered!

Each day is a day of resurrection and joy;
You have brought new life to this world!

Bible passage - Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Let love be sincere; hate what is evil and cling to what is good;

¹⁰ love one another with family affection, and be zealous in showing honour to one another.

¹¹ Do not let your diligent service become tiresome, but be enthusiastic in spirit; serve the Lord.

¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in affliction, and be constant in prayer.

¹³ Share together with those amongst the saints who are needy, and strive to be hospitable.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless, do not curse them.

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

¹⁶ So keep one another in mind; do not over-rate yourself but be accommodating towards those who have fallen on hard times, and do not be conceited.

¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil, and take care to do what is right in the sight of everyone, ¹⁸ and if possible, live peaceably with all, as far as you are able.

¹⁹ Friends, do not seek your own revenge, but leave it to the wrath (of God); for it is written, 'vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'

²⁰ Rather, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; because in doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.' ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Bible Study

Review

There is surely no excuse for anyone to say that Scripture does not give us clear guidelines for how to live the Christian life! This substantial passage of Romans is a clear and lengthy list itemising in detail the appropriate way for Christian people to live in the light of the Gospel. Each of these succinct verses contains at least one, and often two pieces of moral or practical advice, and because they all follow immediately after the list of practical gifts (12:3-8), they may all be considered to be the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

Some people think that this passage is just an extension of the list of the gifts found previously in verses 6 to 8. However, there is a change of language and style to be found at the beginning of verse 9, and this indicates that Paul had finished one list (the gifts) and begun a different one, which is this set of advice. Also, the list of gifts (12:3-8) illustrates the principle of unity and diversity within the church; that is, unity in Christ and diversity in individual gifts and graces. Here, we read about the general principles of Christian living, and Paul gives these principles in the form of strong recommendations, and he then comments on each of them, briefly.

This is illustrated in verse 9. Paul starts by speaking about love, and writing '*let love be sincere*'. Love is not just another spiritual gift tacked onto the end of the other gifts of teaching, managing and being merciful (12:8). In the teaching of Paul, love has a special place, and it stands here at the head of his list of advice for Christian living. If the Gospel is the revelation of God's love in Christ, then love must be the principle 'par excellence' of Christian living, so Paul goes on to say more about what it means to be loving; he says, '*hate what is evil and cling to what is good*' (12:9). Then he applies this directly to the most important of circumstances, family life; '*love one another with family affection, and be zealous in showing honour to one another*.' (12:10). So love is at the heart of Christian life in the home, and in all relationships. We could think of it as the bridge between Paul's list of gifts and his specific advice about Christian living.

The list goes on to mention things such as endurance, hospitality, hope, and watching over others in Christ (12:11-16). Each item is mentioned briefly and succinctly, and each one is worth our careful attention. The main part of this study looks at each verse in turn, drawing out the importance of the teaching. However, as we read this, something important emerges. Every sentence can be cross-referenced to the teachings of Jesus and other guidance within the New Testament! For example, when Paul says '*be patient in suffering*' (12:12), he describes what is surely a major theme of Jesus' teaching in four words (see Matthew 5:10,11 and the whole of chapter 24). The theme of patient endurance also crops up frequently in other parts of Paul's own teaching (see 2 Corinthians in particular, e.g. 1:4, 6:4f.).

The fact that we can cross refer most of this teaching is a good sign that this material was used, and was perhaps intended to be used, as a 'catechism'. By this we mean a set of teaching about the Christian life which is easily memorable, and possibly given as an aid to candidates for baptism. Such lists of Christian belief are out of fashion in many places today, but have been published by churches for centuries.

I certainly remember the catechism I was given as a young teenager, and I found it a very useful document for reference. I would even go so far as saying that it taught me many of the historic truths of the Christian church that I hold dear to this day. If our text today did not start life as a catechism, then it is almost certain that it was used in this way in later years.

Going Deeper

In most Bible studies, I take a thematic approach to discussing the text. Today, however, I will offer brief notes on each of the verses which give invaluable references to other texts in the Bible giving similar moral guidance. This helps us gain a good general understanding of the good Christian life.

Going Deeper

Verse 9 The opening words 'let love be genuine' are interesting because the Greek word for 'genuine' literally means 'without hypocrisy', which means love that is consistent in word and deed. Jesus speaks against hypocrisy (Matt 6:2,5,16; 7:5; 15:7; 23:13f.) on many occasions, but the key word in this verse is 'love'. Here, Paul uses the distinct Christian word 'agape', which is love which comes from a deep determination to do what is right, whatever the cost. This is the kind of love which can 'hate what is evil and cling to what is good'.

Verse 10 This verse begins with Paul's commendation of a different kind of love, 'philadelphia', which means love shared within a family. Such love which forms a common bond of friendship or trust is a vital ingredient of any church community. In that same vein, Paul calls us to be 'zealous' in 'showing honour to one another'. This is similar to Paul's earlier appeal (12:3), and at its heart is the need for all God's people to show the deepest respect for all others within the Christian community (see also Phil. 2:3 and 1 Cor 12:22-26).

Verse 11 The emphasis in this verse is on the endurance which comes from being enthusiastic. It is hard to keep going through difficult times if you are not wholly committed to what you are doing, for example. The last sentence of verse 11 is more difficult. There is some reason to believe that copies of Paul's letters may have mixed up the two words 'kurios' (meaning 'lord') and 'kairos' (meaning 'time', or 'age'). So whereas most translations, including mine, have the instruction 'serve the Lord', it is possible Paul could have written 'serve the present age'. The idea that we should serve our own times is one that is very strong in some churches.

Verse 12 At this point in Paul's advice, we are strongly reminded of the teaching of Jesus. Being 'patient in suffering' is a major theme of His teaching (Matt 5:12f. – see above) and endurance in suffering is a major New Testament theme (Rom 5:3, 8:35; 2 Cor 1:4, 6:4; Phil 14:4; John 16:33 etc.) Whilst many Christians struggle with suffering today, it is undoubtedly true that in the past, the church has grown when it has suffered, and being a Christian has 'cost' a great deal.

Verse 13 Hospitality is the theme of this verse. It was an important necessity for the early church which had to meet in people's homes, and provide accommodation for travelling preachers and evangelists such as Paul. (see 1 Tim 3:2, 5:10; 1 Peter 4:9, Hebrews 13:2)

Verse 14 This verse is very similar to the words of Jesus in Luke 6:28; 'bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you'. Some ancient papyri copies of Paul's letters omit the word 'you', making the sentence: 'bless those who persecute'. This makes the instruction sound more general rather than personal, and more like a ministry of care for others.

Verse 15 In 1 Corinthians 12:26, Paul says 'if one part of the body suffers, all suffer with it'. The same though appears to be in his mind in this passage which gives the more general advice, we must empathise with others, whatever their feelings. Those who are not part of the world of counselling may be unfamiliar with 'empathy', and this verse is a good Biblical description of it.

Verse 16 At this point in Paul's list, his sentences become longer. This verse continues the theme of respect within the Christian fellowship, touched on twice before in this chapter (12:3,10). Paul's phrase 'keep one another in mind' reminds us of his appeal to Christians to live in harmony in Philippians; 'have the same mind which is in Christ' (Phil 2:2-5 see also 2 Cor 13:11; Phil 4:2), and also Jesus' appeal to his own disciples to live in the unity given them by the Father (see John 17)

Verse 17 & 18 The principle of non-violence is deeply rooted in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament (see Matthew 5:38-48, 1 Thess. 5:15, 1 Peter 3:9) What is new in this text is Paul's advice to 'take care to do what is right'. In other words, we should ensure that what people see of our actions is consistent with our beliefs, not that we should fall into the trap of the hypocrites in Jesus' famous parable (Matt 6:1f.)

Verse 19 Paul quotes the famous saying from the Moses' last speech in Deuteronomy; 'vengeance is mine, says the Lord ...' (Deut 32:35). This is an urgent call upon God's people not to seek revenge or personal recompense under any circumstances, but to submit such painful matters to the Lord. In the Greek of this verse, the sentence does not mention God; it says 'leave it to the wrath'. The 'wrath' is the divine law within the universe that sin is its own reward (see Romans 1:18f., 2:5, 2:8; 1 Thess 1:10)

Verse 20 / 21 The quote 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him ...' is from Proverbs 25:21-22, complete with the notion of 'heaping coals' upon the head of one's enemy. The idea seems to be that if we retaliate against evil only by doing good, then we only make things worse for the person who is being evil to us. This is a little strange, because we would think that the right response might be to try and act in such a way as might win over an enemy, and it is just possible that this may be the case, and the verse has been subject to some misunderstanding. The idea of 'heaping coals upon the head' is well attested in ancient Egyptian sources as

a sign of repentance. It was an extreme form of covering oneself in ashes, whereby a person carried a bowl on his head (insulated by a cloth) containing hot coals. Now, if this practice was known about from Old Testament times, and Paul also knew of it, then our interpretation of the passage is quite different. Offering food and water to an enemy becomes an action designed to draw them into repentance, the first step towards accepting Christ.

Application

This long list of good behaviour and recommended practice should perhaps be listed and printed as a poster to be displayed upon the walls of churches. All too often, I have observed Christian people fail to have any desire to match these standards in matters of spiritual or moral importance for the life of the church. The damage this does to the life of God's people can be quite intolerable. You will be able to pick out one or two themes from this text which remind you of where things have either gone very well or very badly in the life of your church.

There does seem to be a continuing emphasis in what Paul says on equality within the body of Christ. I have come across few churches where all who profess faith feel equally empowered as people of God to act in faith and take up a lively role within the church; yet this is an important aim for all God's people. The world brings to the church a wide range of assumptions about the suitability of people for office, the kind of people who might do this or that job, for example, and many Christian folk are left feeling that their role is limited. When the Lord has come upon His church in power in the past, things have happened which are largely outside the experience of those who organise the existing church, and people who have felt disempowered before, have been empowered in their faith and their ministry. When will we learn!

In addition to equality, the touchstone for all behaviour within this passage is surely the quality of Christian 'agape' love. Indeed, as with so many of Paul's other writings, you could say that the whole passage is an essay on what this means, in practice. We have even managed to find a rational explanation of why the difficult verse 20 could fit into this pattern of loving actions. On the one hand, these verses are a glorious explanation of the liberty of God's people, but on the other hand, they are a tragic reminder to us of what goes wrong all too often around us in our own churches. This passage of Scripture should be better known, and used as a call to repentance; then we might take them seriously as a description from Scripture of what it means to live a Christian life.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which of these verses do you find the most challenging, and the most difficult to equate with the church as you know it?
2. Within your group, each of you should find one word or phrase which sums up this passage for you. Everyone should share their reflections.
3. How do you believe God will work in His church to enable His people to be liberated into this kind of service and witness?

Personal comments by author

I have found it very helpful to have texts such as this that speak about the practical truths of Christian living. The passage is easily memorised and can give great help to people who find it hard to focus on what God tells His people to do in everyday life. There are many things you can do with this text, and if it is important, then God will guide you in how to use it best.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- Spend some time considering where you might fall down by to the standards set in this passage of Scripture. You should not feel embarrassed, because there are few people who can honestly say that they have not fallen short of these standards.
- Discuss these scriptures with others, perhaps try to get them discussed as part of your house group, or taught at church. If you feel it to be right, do your best to convince others of the importance of this text.

Final Prayer

Thank You, Lord God, for your guidance in Jesus Christ. We would travel far away from Your safe paths if You did not help us and guide us on our way. Help us to face the challenges that come to us with faith and courage, and give us hope for our future in You. AMEN
