

# Northolt Park Baptist Church

## New Relationships – Romans 12:3-8

Romans 12 is a great passage for a church to spend some time in! We have already introduced the chapter by looking at the first word – ‘therefore’. We reminded ourselves that Romans 1-11 comes before Romans 12, that when we think about the church we begin with *God*, and what God has done for us in *Christ*, bringing us together as one new people through the *Spirit*.

Then we looked more closely at verses 1 and 2, reminding ourselves that the church begins with God’s mercy, that the members of the church individually offer their bodies, their whole selves, as a corporate sacrifice to God, and that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. There we were thinking about new *minds*, and here – in 12:3-8 – we are thinking about new *relationships*.

Just in case we’re in any doubt as to who this passage applies to, Paul makes it quite clear in verse 3. Who is this message for? 12:3 – ‘For by the grace of God given me I say to *every one* of you.’ It’s not a message for *some* in the church, or a message only for the leaders, but for everyone. So, what is Paul’s message for everyone? As we go through verses 3-8, we’ll look at it in three parts.

### 1. Thinking about Ourselves (12:3)

In verse 2, Paul has spoken about the renewal of our mind. Verse 3 begins with an important word – ‘for’ – which means Paul is now talking about the outworking of what the renewed mind means for *how* we think about ourselves. How are Christians to think when their mind is renewed? 12:3 tells us: ‘Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.’ Actually, Paul uses the word ‘think’ in that sentence *four* times as if to emphasise the point; it goes something like this: ‘Don’t *think* more highly of yourself than it is right for you to *think*, but *think* with sober *thinking*.’

How are we to think? *Soberly*, says Paul. We’re familiar enough with adverts that speak about drinking and driving, and motorway signs that tell us: ‘Think, don’t drink.’ We know that too much alcohol can move us from a position where we’re thinking relatively clearly (!) to a position where our judgment is clouded – sometimes with unhappy or even tragic consequences. Think soberly, says Paul. Are we thinking of ourselves soberly? Do I have a falsely high view of myself? Do I exaggerate my importance? Is my view of myself coloured by the fact that I’m not thinking soberly?

As well as thinking soberly, we are to think (according to the last part of verse 3) ‘in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you’. What is this ‘measure of faith’? It could be that Paul is talking about an *amount* of faith. So, Paul might be saying something like, ‘If you have a *teaspoon* of faith, think of yourself according to that measure, but if you have a *gallon* of faith, think of yourself according to that measure.’ If that is the case, we are to think about ourselves according to the level of faith we each have, and that might be different for each one of us.

But ‘measure’ is better understood in terms of a *standard*. It’s a measure in the sense of a *yardstick*, which provides me with a standard to measure myself – and it’s the same fixed standard for all of us: it’s the faith God has given us. So, we don’t measure ourselves by how much we do, or how much we have, or how clever we are. We have all been given the same faith in Christ, and it’s that faith which affects the way we think about ourselves. It’s the faith by which we are brought into relationship with God (as Paul has already spoken about at length in Romans), and that is the standard of measurement in a church. Do we know how to measure ourselves? We do so by the gospel, by the cross. The gospel measures us in the way we think about ourselves. And we are no more than what we

are before the cross of Jesus. To each one of us God has given the same faith. Let that be the standard of the way we think of ourselves.

However, although we share in one faith, and that faith is the measure of how we should think of ourselves, we are all *different*, and that's what Paul goes on to talk about next.

## 2. Belonging to the Body (12:4-5)

When our minds are renewed, we think soberly about ourselves in relation to the standard of faith, and in understanding that we belong to the one body of Christ.

A few weeks ago, we looked at three images used in the Bible to describe the church. The first was the church as a *building*, like a temple, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone. But it's a building that grows – which leads to a second image, that the church is a *body*; but that leads in turn to a third picture, as this body takes on the image of a *bride*.

Here is one of the passages where Paul talks about the church using the analogy of a *body* (12:4-5). Paul talks at greater length about the body in 1 Corinthians 12. It's a very simple picture, really. It tells us that there is one body, with many parts, each with its own function, and each needing the others. We all perform different functions, and each one of us needs the rest. Each member has their own particular place, all are different, and each one needs the others.

There are some important lessons for us to make sure we learn here. For instance, so far as this passage is concerned, there's no place for a 'lone ranger' Christianity. So many of the heroes in movies, for instance, are the lone figures fighting against the odds, battling against their friends as well as their enemies, making a stand for themselves. And we can sometimes think of our Christian lives that way too. But that kind of thinking goes against what Paul says about the church. If we're a Christian we're called not to go it alone, but to be so as part of the church, the body of Christ. So far as the Bible is concerned, there is no such thing as an unchurched Christian.

Christian isolationism is a denial of what it means to be in Christ.

Then again, our understanding of church is sometimes that we are dependent on one person, the pastor maybe, to do everything. Or we are dependent on a few people, the pastor and the deacons, to do everything. But, if the church is a body made up of many different parts, and if each part depends on the others, then *each one of us* belongs to *everyone else!*

As one part of the body, I depend on all the other parts of the body. I am not self-sufficient. We belong to each other. I am what I am, and I have the gifts I have for the benefit of the body of Christ. And that's what Paul goes on to talk about in verses 6-8.

## 3. Using our Gifts (12:6-8)

This is one of a number of passages in the New Testament where particular gifts are listed (see also 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, 27-31; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 4:10-11).

Each of the passages in their own way makes the same points. First of all, it's clear that there are *different* gifts. Paul says that categorically here at the start of verse 6: 'We have different gifts' (12:6a). Secondly, the gifts are given as a result of God's grace; again, that's made very clear here again in the next part of verse 6: 'We have different gifts, *according to the grace given us*' (12:6b). And thirdly, it's also clear that the gifts are given so that the whole body will be built up. Let's have a brief look at the ones Paul mentions here.

- Prophecy (12:6c). Prophecy comes at the beginning of the list and seems to be a prominent gift in the other lists of gifts in the New Testament. It might be worth taking a glance at 1 Corinthians 14 here, where Paul talks about prophecy at greater length. In 1 Corinthians 14:3, Paul says that everyone who prophesies speaks to people for 'their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort. In 14:31 – prophecy also has a *teaching* function. Those are the clearest statements in the New Testament of what is to be achieved by prophecy, and they are important. We sometimes think of prophecy as being about the future, but it would appear to have more

to do with speaking about *present* circumstances. And it certainly doesn't have anything to do with giving the prophet's ego a boost. It's of value only if it builds up the body of Christ. Paul is quite clear about that in 1 Corinthians 14.

Back in Romans 12, he tells us that it's to be done 'in proportion to his faith' (NIV). That's not the best translation of this phrase; a better translation is put in the footnote in the NIV: 'in agreement with the faith'. Once again, as in 12:3, it's not referring to a *quantity* of faith, but to a *standard* of faith. Prophecy has to match up to the faith, to be compatible with the gospel. Prophets are to speak 'according to the pattern of the faith' – in a way that agrees with the faith.

- Service (12:7a). This is a very broad term, which Paul doesn't fill out. In some ways, it's good that he doesn't make it more specific, because that means it probably has a general sense of serving in different ways. If that's you, says Paul, then get on and do it.
- Teaching (12:7b). Likewise with teaching – get on and use it.
- Encouragement (12:8a). This is such an important gift to the body of Christ.
- Distribution (12:8b). The NIV calls this 'contributing to the needs of others', which could be providing for the needs of others by sharing your own things, or it could be responsibility for distributing things within the church; whatever, it's about helping practically with people in need. If that's your gift, says Paul, do it generously.

- Support (12:8c). The NIV has 'leadership', but the word probably refers to a support ministry – giving people support and help wherever they need it. And if that's us, says Paul, we should do it eagerly.

- Care (12:8d). Or mercy – a practical concern for those in need, which we do cheerfully.

All these gifts are concerned with our responsibility to one another, with helping one another, and teaching one another. They are gifts of *speaking* and gifts of *service*, which we do for the good of each other.

•••

Is this us, then? Does this describe Northolt Park Baptist Church? That's the challenge for our new relationships with each other which flow out of our renewed minds. There's the challenge for all of us to think of ourselves appropriately, according to the measure of faith that has been given to us. There's the challenge to belong to the body, with all that that means in terms of not doing things for my own sake but for the good of the whole body. And there's the challenge of using our gifts, whatever those gifts might be, so that the whole church might be built up. Let's ask that God will continue to work on us and in us as individuals and continue to help us as a church, that together we will be the people of God he wants us to be. Amen.

*Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 27 May 2007*