

Northolt Park Baptist Church

New Lifestyle – Romans 12:9-21

In Romans 12, Paul lays out a vision for the people of God. He begins by writing about our *new minds* (12:1-2). We live a life marked by dependence on God's mercy, a life marked by ongoing sacrifice of our bodies, and a life marked by transforming renewal of our minds.

Then, Paul moves on to write about our *new relationships* (12:3-8). We are to think about ourselves according to the standard of faith we have all received (12:3); we belong together in the body of Christ (12:4-5); and we are to use our different gifts for the upbuilding of the body (12:6-8).

And so we come to 12:9-21, where we move from thinking about new minds, and new relationships to reflecting on our *new lifestyle*. When we belong to Jesus and belong to the church, and when we offer our selves to him and to each other, there are some very concrete and practical ways that this shows itself. And, although it's not easy to structure this part of the chapter, we will look at the passage under three headings.

1. Loving with Sincerity (12:9-13)

The first part of verse 9 serves as a heading for this section – 'Love must be sincere'. 'Sincere' (NIV) is related to the word for 'hypocrite': Paul is saying that love must be *unhypocritical*, or *genuine*, and that kind of love is then unpacked in one long sentence down to verse 13 spelling out, in different ways, the practical implications of loving with sincerity.

Paul does this a number of times in his letters, where he puts together lots of short sentences, with exhortations and encouragements. We can sometimes get the idea that he's shouting out commands. Indeed, they *are* framed as commands, but Paul is like a loving parent, concerned for welfare of the people he wrote to. When I was a young lad, and was going off to camp or away on a school journey for a few

days, our parents would come and wave us off. My mum would say all sorts of things at the last moment: 'make sure you brush your teeth, and behave yourself; do what the teachers tell you; make sure you get a good sleep; don't play with that Scott White; don't get up to any mischief; don't forget to change your socks!' She was concerned about me, and wanted to pass on last-minute exhortations about things she felt were important. This is a little like what Paul is doing here: he's wanting to pass on bits and pieces of important encouragement. So, although the exhortations are technically framed as imperatives, that is, in terms of 'do this' and 'don't do this', they're not the barking commands of a sergeant major so much as the loving urges of an anxious parent.

So, what is Paul urging us to do? After calling us to love with sincerity, Paul shows us that it's not a wishy-washy love, but a love that has moral backbone – 'hate what is evil; cling to what is good', he says in 12:9. It's a love that involves moral judgment, being committed to what is good, and hating that which is evil.

The main focus of verse 10 is on mutual love in the body of Christ – being devoted to one another, loving one another, honouring one another. Eugene Peterson in his paraphrase of the New Testament translates the last part of 12:10 as: 'Practice playing second fiddle.' One of my colleagues, who trained as a musician, mentioned to me recently that many of the violinists who play second fiddle in the orchestra are often just as good as the person who's playing the first violin, and they might even aspire to be the first violin; but their job as the second violin is to play in such a way that the first violin is able to play *their* part, and get the applause. 'Honour one another above yourselves,' says Paul – 'practice playing second fiddle'.

And then we have some lovely balances in how we are to understand the Christian life in

verses 11 and 12. The phrase 'keeping your spiritual fervour' carries with it the sense of 'bubbling in the Spirit'; it's the word for what happens when you apply heat to water or metal, which makes it bubble. But along with it we have the phrase 'serving the Lord', literally 'slaving the Lord'. And that's a beautiful balance which we don't always manage: bubbling in the Spirit and slaving for the Lord. And then in verse 11, we are called to be joyful in hope *and* faithful in affliction.

Verse 13 describes another aspect – sharing with the needy, showing hospitality – which shows us (again) that this is not just about feeling slushy and nice together. Paul is speaking here in terms of *practical* help, doing things for people, dealing with needs, practising hospitality, seeing people in need and doing something about it.

This is all under the heading of love not being hypocritical, but being genuine and sincere. Our new lifestyle as God's people involves *loving with sincerity*, with all the practical implications of that. In fact, Paul goes on to talk about some more of those implications in the next part of the passage.

2. Living in Harmony (12:14-16)

The phrase is taken from the first part of verse 16 – 'Live in harmony with one another'. But Paul begins in verse 14 by calling us to 'bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse'. Paul might have in mind the teaching of Jesus about loving our enemies, and praying for those who persecute us (Matthew 5:44).

It's an incredible example of the renewed mind which comes to us as a result of being Christians. All these requirements only make sense if they're being asked of the people whose very selves are being offered as a living sacrifice, and whose minds are being daily renewed.

And then in verse 15, we have another echo of Paul's teaching on the body of Christ – that when part of the body suffers, every part suffers, and if one part is honoured, every part is honoured (1 Corinthians 12:25-26). Rejoicing with those who rejoice is generally a little

easier than weeping with those who weep – though not so easy, perhaps, if someone's joy is at our expense! Weeping is more difficult, but crucial, when our brothers and sisters are carrying heavy loads, crushing loads even, and it is our duty to weep with them – not bouncing up to them like Tigger and slapping them on the back, but listening, trying to understand, and – against everything that social workers are taught – being emotionally involved with them.

'Live in harmony with one another', says Paul in verse 16. Actually, here we're back to the 'thinking' words we've already had in verses 2 and 3. 'Be transformed by the renewing of your *mind*', says Paul in verse 2. And then in verse 3: 'Don't *think* more highly of yourself than it is right for you to *think*, but *think* with sober *thinking*.' And now here in verse 16: '*thinking* the same as everyone else' – not thinking high things about myself, but thinking the same things with one another. It's a shared understanding and recognition of one another. It will be difficult for me to live in harmony with everyone else, if I think I am superior to everyone else.

In the middle of verse 16, the phrase 'be willing to associate with people of low position' (NIV) is not the best translation. It has to do with associating with the humble. The message is that we need to be aware of superiority. Superior attitudes are dangerous, because even if we are trying to help people we are more likely to get their backs up if we come at it from the perspective that we're the superior one in the relationship.

So, our new lifestyle will involve loving with sincerity and living in harmony. Paul probably has in mind love and harmony in the context of the Christian fellowship, but love must extend beyond than the body of Christ, and that's what Paul goes on to talk about.

3. Refusing to Retaliate (12:17-21)

How do we deal with persecutors and enemies? Ideally, we shouldn't have any! That's what Paul says in verse 18! And that's important, isn't it? Some Christians are in their element making enemies of people; but a

confrontational Christianity which goes out of its way to make enemies doesn't figure here.

Paul recognises, however, that it may not always be possible. So, how do we deal with enemies? Verse 17 tells us: 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil'. No retaliation. That's demanding, isn't it? And it's another aspect of the renewed mind – because retaliation is what comes naturally to most of us, and we have to work hard at not retaliating, not biting back, not coming back with the snide comment, or trading insult for insult.

'Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.' We might wonder why Paul doesn't say 'be careful to do what is right in the eyes of God'. But we know from elsewhere in Scripture, that the way we behave affects the way people respond to Jesus and the gospel (e.g., 1 Peter 2:12). We should leave no handle for those who might reject Jesus the gospel by the way we behave.

So, no retaliation; and then, in verse 19, no revenge (12:19). This is more than a simple retaliation; 'revenge' is a *justice* word, and it has to do with insisting on my rights. Paul says that it's *God's* prerogative, and in the next chapter, Paul uses the same word when he says that God has appointed rulers to exercise retribution on those who do wrong (13:3-4). God has the right, and the state has the right under God, but I don't have that right. Leave it to God. That doesn't mean to say that we don't care about injustice in the world; but when we do so, we do so not from the perspective of *self-interest*.

What Paul says in verse 20 appears strange to us (12:20). Coals of fire! What's that all about? Actually, it's a quotation from Proverbs 25:21-22. It's tricky to be fully sure what Paul is meaning here. The most common guess is that by showing love to an enemy, by not retaliating and not seeking revenge, but instead by feeding him and giving him something to drink, we heap coals on his head in the sense that he gets pangs of conscience; if by being good to the evil person, they feel remorse and ashamed, then we'll be overcoming evil with good (12:21).

There's also some evidence of a ritual from ancient Egypt, where a penitent person walked around carrying a basket of coals on his head; it may well be that Proverbs is picking up that image, which Paul is then also picking up. If that is the case, Paul is telling us that we should have a policy of trusting that through our failure to respond to people in kind – in retaliation and revenge – they might be led to repent.

And just in case, we think all this is a passive response, Paul finishes by saying (in 12:21): 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good'. Paul began this section in verse 9 with *evil* and *good*, and now he comes back to them. Overcoming evil with good means working *actively* for good in a world where evil is rampant. To retaliate is to be overcome with evil; we should respond in the opposite way.

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So, there are some pointers to the new lifestyle of God's people – loving with sincerity, living in harmony, refusing to retaliate. Again, we face the same challenge as we have faced in previous reflections on Romans 12: is this a picture of us – not just as individuals, but as a church? A love which plays second fiddle, living in harmony in the very practical ways where the rubber hits the road, and extending that love even to those who might wrong us and harm us. May it be so, for God's own glory. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 3 June 2007