

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 18 April 2004

No. T0312

Speaker: Mr. Gordon Kell

A look at Romans: Romans 12-16

Before we look at the final chapters of Paul's letter to the Romans, it might be helpful to review the whole book. Romans can be divided into 6 sections.

The first section, 1:1-17 introduces the letter.

In the second section, from 1:18 to 3:20, Paul takes up the universal aspects of the Gospel. First the Gentiles are addressed (1:18 to the end of the chapter). Then in chapter 2 the Jews are addressed. Afterwards in 3:1-20 the condition of the whole world is addressed. Paul then presents the teaching of justification by faith in 3:21-5:21. The Gospel is stated in 3:21-31, illustrated in chapter 4 and expounded in chapter 5.

The third section is chapters 6-8. In this section, Paul takes up the Christian life of holiness. In chapter 6 the subject is deliverance from the power of sin. In chapter 7 it is deliverance from the power of the law. And, in chapter 8, we have the work of the Holy Spirit and the believer's security in the love of God.

Section four deals with God's purpose for Israel. Chapter 9 is about their election, chapter 10 their rejection and chapter 11 their conversion.

We then come to the final two sections of this great letter and it is these sections that concern us this morning.

In section 5, chapters 12 to 14, we have Paul's teaching about the practical duties of the Christian life. First of all in regard to the Church (chapter 12), then in regard to the State (chapter 13) and, finally, in regard to personal relationships (chapter 14).

In section 6, Paul gives an overview of his ministry in chapter 15 and comments on his friends in chapter 16.

There is an immense amount of material in these last five chapters so we will have to restrict ourselves to some of the key aspects Paul raises. At the beginning of chapter 12, Paul is looking for a response from his readers to the mercy of God through the Gospel he had unfolded in the preceding chapters. So he writes, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

There could hardly be a more relevant challenge to Christians today. The whole basis of our faith is the sacrifice of love the Lord Jesus Christ made for us upon the cross. God now looks for a response in the hearts and lives of His people. That response is a "living sacrifice". This means serving God in every part of our lives. It involves personal holiness and the fulfilment of God's will in our relationships, in our homes, among the people of God, in our work and in our communities. It also involves not conforming ourselves to the world's thinking or manner of life but being transformed to prove the will of God.

The words "conformed" and "transformed" are important. "Conformed" here means an outward change that makes us like others. Let me give you an illustration. When I was young, I was given a Walt Disney modelling kit. It had some rubber moulds of cartoon characters and some plaster. You mixed the plaster and poured it into the moulds then waited for it to set. The plaster took the shape of the character and afterwards you could paint it. The models were all the same because they had been poured into the same mould. Paul argues that that is what the world is like. It wants everyone to conform to a pattern of life that agrees with current thinking. A mixture of philosophies, politics, art, marketing and the behaviour of society form this pattern, or mould.

Paul argues that Christians should not pour themselves into the world's mould but be transformed. The word "transformed" means metamorphosis. This is what happens when a caterpillar forms its chrysalis and, after two weeks or so, a butterfly begins to emerge. The struggle the butterfly has in releasing itself from the chrysalis is part of its preparation for a new life. A scientist once used a penknife to help a butterfly out of its chrysalis. As a result, the butterfly could not fly. It needed to struggle to make it strong enough to use its wings.

God wants to transform His people by the renewing of their minds. This spiritual change, brought about by the action of the Spirit of God and the word of God in our lives. It is a struggle that requires our obedience and our willing response. This transformation should be seen, not only in the lives of individual Christians, but amongst the people of God as a whole. It should be demonstrated by the use of our spiritual gifts for the benefit of the body of Christ. So Paul writes, "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honour giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord," (12:4-11).

The characteristics of this transformation demonstrate a new life characterised by hope, patience, prayer and giving. We are to care for each other. We are to use our homes for hospitality. We are to bless when badly treated rather than responding in kind. We are to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. A spirit of humility and peace rather than pride, revenge and conceit should also mark us. These are not common characteristics even among Christians. This makes Romans 12 all the more challenging in today's world.

In chapter 13 Paul moves on to the interesting question of the Christian and the state. Christ's Church was never envisaged by Him to be part of the political systems of the world. Sadly, Christendom, which has to be distinguished from true Christianity, has become a potent force in the political, economic and military history of the world. In John 17:14, Christ describes His people as being, "not of the world, just as I am not of world." But He asks His father not to take us out of the world but to make us effective witnesses in it. This is another great challenge to modern thinking. Some Christians are tricked into conforming to society's ideas in the false belief that it will attract people to Christ. That is a strange conclusion when Christ came to deliver us from a world, which hated Him and His message. Witnessing is about standing for the unchanging certainties of God: His love, His truth, His holiness. This will sometimes bring us into conflict with a world with different and secular standards. Nevertheless, it is a world we have to live in and which has authorities to which we have to be subject.

Paul affirms God as the supreme authority but recognises that man has the responsibility to rule the world with just government. This delegated authority has often been abused and corrupted and the pages of history are littered with tyrants and dictators of every description. However, God ordains the principle of just government. Governments are responsible before God to ensure society is ruled fairly. I recently heard Tony Benn, the former Labour Cabinet Minister, commenting on childhood. He said he was impressed by how his mother had taught him about the Old Testament prophets who spoke out against rulers who failed in their responsibility to ensure their people were governed justly.

Paul encourages Christians to live out their faith and meet the commitments authorities place on us. Taxation was as much an issue in Paul's day as it is today and he especially addresses it, "Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honour to whom honour. Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law," (13:7 and 8).

But in highlighting the responsibility Christians have to fulfil their obligations in society, Paul points out that the order we now live under is not permanent but a temporary regime because Christ has promised to return. Paul instructs his fellow Christians to undertake their responsibilities in the light of a coming Lord of lords and King of kings, "And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed. The night is far spent, the day is at hand," (13:11 and 12).

In chapter 14, Paul turns to personal relationships especially with to regard personal convictions. We all have the tendency to think that everyone should act in accord with our convictions. Trouble arises when we try to impose our personal convictions on others. That normally leads to divisions and a breakdown of effective witness.

I remember reading about the persecuted Romanian church during Stalin's dictatorship of the Eastern bloc countries. Many Christians were imprisoned. In one such prison camp they had had a remarkable witness and no matter how much the camp's atheist commander tried, he could not stop the brightness of their testimony. Then one day, he had an idea. He decided to place all the Christians together instead of being spread around the camp. You would have thought the opportunity to pray and have fellowship together would have increased the witness they had. The reverse happened. They started arguing about their personal convictions and soon their unity and testimony was destroyed.

In Paul's day, some Christians freely ate meat, others vegetables. But the problem lay not in the difference in persuasion but in the attitude of those who held different convictions. It was not a matter of fundamental right or

wrong but of a pattern of behaviour arrived at by an individual. Paul's solution was that we should treat one another with respect and courtesy and refrain from judging each other in such matters.

But why is there not a right and wrong answer? God has not made a book of rules for every small item of behaviour. The personal convictions of Christians, provided they do not oppose fundamental beliefs, may differ. For example, Christians may differ about eating meat or just vegetables, special days, or being a conscientious objector. These differences provide the means by which our personal faith is expressed and also put us in situations where we have to deal with such differences. Do we avoid or distance ourselves for those holding different convictions or do we show Christian grace, affection and support to those for who Christ died. If there were not such tests of Christian fellowship, we would not have the opportunities to show grace towards each other.

In Paul's words, "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: "As I live, says the LORD, Every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way," (14:7-13).

Paul was personally convinced you could eat meat as well as vegetables but he would not cause offence to a brother who did not share his conviction. He sacrificed his own liberty on occasions to show love to his brother. He puts into practice what he teaches at the beginning of Romans 12. He sacrifices. He is not conformed to the world which says, "I don't care if I offend you or not. I'll do what I like". Instead he is transformed by the love of God. It is so sad when fellow Christians fail to show love to those who have genuine convictions that they do not share. I heard of a lady who wore a head covering out of conviction. She visited a place of worship where this conviction was not shared and experienced unpleasant criticism and even the indignity of a fellow Christian knocking off her hat. This kind of behaviour shows why Paul wrote Romans 14. He did it to prevent Christians showing contempt for each other and to remind them that they had been shown the grace of God and were responsible to show that same grace to others. The kingdom of God is characterised by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Its subjects, therefore, should be marked by these characteristics. Our aim should be to, "pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another," (14:19).

Paul continues this theme of edification, or building up the people of God, in chapter 15. It is linked to his earlier thoughts of sacrifice when he reminds his readers of the Lord Jesus, "For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, "The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me." For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus," (15:3-5).

Paul's ministry was centred on Christ and his great desire was that Christians might be more Christ like. He had a very deep experience of the grace of God. It was that grace which turned him from being the great persecutor of the Church to a great builder of the Church of God. God in grace had also given him a special ministry to the Gentiles. In this chapter, he reflects the way God's mercy and grace, which had focussed on Israel for so long, had moved out to all nations, "that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written: "For this reason I will confess to You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name." And again he says: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people!" And again: "Praise the LORD, all you Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!" And again, Isaiah says: "There shall be a root of Jesse; And He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope," (15:9-12).

Paul's missionary zeal had not diminished. He had made it his aim to preach the Gospel where it had not been heard. But he also wanted to help those churches which he had never visited. It is this mixture of evangelism (adding to the church) and teaching (building up the church) that is vital to the work of God today. The Gospel needs to be constantly proclaimed both by personal appeal and public preaching and, at the same time, the people of God need teaching. This teaching has to be revisited and reinforced.

Paul was on his way to deliver a gift from Macedonia and Achaia to the poverty stricken believers at Jerusalem. This shows the connection between providing both spiritual and material needs. In undertaking this journey, it is touching that Paul never forget the need that he had for the prayers of God's people, especially in view of the dangers he faced. He writes, "Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in your prayers to God for me," (15:30).

You might be forgiven for thinking that Romans 16 is mostly a list of names of Paul's friends with little relevance today. But in an age when individual contributions can be minimized and overlooked, it is important to see how Scripture records the value of each believer. The pressures of modern life can make the Christian vulnerable to feelings of

lack of self worth. This is often the case because we feel our failures more keenly. But God's value of us is immense and this is what Paul emphasises in this chapter.

It is no mistake that the apostle, who was empowered by God in such a remarkable way through the Holy Spirit, acknowledges more than any other the contributions of his fellow believers. He mentions 26 people by name and refers to others. These include 10 women, Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena and Tryphosa, Persis, Rufus' mother, Nereus' sister, Junias and Julia.

Phoebe is mentioned first as a servant of the church and helper of many - a wonderful commendation! Then Paul remembers Andronicus and Junia, who may have been husband and wife. They were his kinsmen and fellow prisoners, well respected by the apostles and had been Christians for about 25 years. In this brief verse, Paul highlights those features we should value in the church, service, Christian relationships, suffering and experience. In the church, respect of these important aspects of life is vital. Too often lifelong discipleship and experience with God is overlooked in an age when respect for older people and the contribution they have made is diminishing. Younger people were also foremost in Paul's mind and Timothy, Paul's young fellow worker, is an outstanding example in verse 21.

Christian homes of Priscilla and Aquila (verse 5) Aristobulus (verse 10), Narcissus (verse 11) and Gaius (verse 23) are highlighted. These were places of hospitality and often where churches met. The Christian home was central to the early Christian church and today, against a background of family breakdown, it is once again at the forefront of Christian testimony. The great and the small are placed together in verse 23, "Erastus the chamberlain of the city saluteth you, and Quartus a brother." The early church was not a place where partiality was permitted, but rich and poor were equal.

Paul also warns of the dangers posed by divisive and disruptive characters within the church. His solution is to avoid them and not provide them with the opportunity to cause problems. Strong leadership is needed to overcome such difficulties and the word of God should always be our guide.

Paul ends his great letter with the God of peace (20), power (25), and wisdom (27). We have peace with God through the Lord Jesus and now know the God of peace. We have the all-powerful Spirit of God indwelling within our hearts. And we have the wisdom of God revealed to us in the word of God. Everything has been provided for us to offer our lives as "living sacrifices" to the One who loved us and gave Himself for us. We have received; now let us respond!

Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.