

Romans 12, Pt. 2

Since September, I have been reiterating the point that Paul's letter to the Romans is the good news of God's righteousness. Our God is holy. Our God does right. His standard is a righteous standard, and his justice is a complete justice. He vindicates his righteousness through both the way of judgment and the way of mercy. Judgment is holding the world accountable to his standard. Mercy is giving people hope, forgiveness, and grace by means of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Having received this mercy, God's people are then called to live righteously in this world, to become witnesses and mirrors of the righteousness of God. It is important to say that this does not mean playing games with God's law. We are not to be like the people mentioned in 10:3 - "For not knowing about God's righteousness and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God." It is not our job to try and establish our own righteousness. In our culture, this often comes through something that has been called "virtue-signaling." This happens when people - be they liberal or conservative - say something or do something so that it is clear to everyone else that they are part of the in-group, that they are the morally superior ones. The most egregious acts of virtue-signaling happen online. We share things or write things, so that everyone knows where our loyalties lie. But God doesn't need nor respond to our virtue-signaling. Our standards pale in comparison to the standards of God.

Instead, our hope is found in 10:4 - "For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Christ is the end of the law both in the sense that he puts to death all the silly law games that we like to play and because it is his law. He is the embodiment of God's righteous standards. When we give up the virtue-signaling and face God's full standard, we know we fall short. And then we seek rescue through the blood of Jesus. We are born again. We are joined in union to Jesus. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit. With new hearts, we can really begin the work of displaying God's righteousness in the world. We can sacrifice our bodies - our finite, limited selves - as a thanksgiving offering, responding to the mercies of God in Christ. And we find that the Spirit is in us, changing us and making us like Jesus.

God's people are called to display his righteousness into the world. Our minds must be renewed. This has been the burden of Paul's letter in the first eleven chapters. Paul lays out the heart of his missionary theology, so that he might find a basis in Rome for far-reaching missionary endeavors. But transformation doesn't just happen through understanding and analyzing. We also must come at the question of God's will for our lives through a focus on our behaviors, relationships, and the community. The burden of the final five chapters is precisely how we lay down our bodies considering God's mercies in Christ. Our relationships to church members and neighbors matter. The health of our Christian community matters. How we spend our time and take up space in the world matters. In this twelfth chapter, we see Paul laying out ideas about the nature of the church. His two primary concerns in this chapter are **roles** and **relationships**. It is to those subjects that we now must turn.

Roles in the church. In v. 3, Paul lays down the principle that no one in the church should think more highly of himself than he ought to think. Instead, as vv. 4-5 say, each of us is a member of the body and each of us has our own function. In unhealthy communities, some people develop the crazy idea that they must do everything, that everything would fall apart if they let up for a moment. But this is not faith. Faith says, "God has called me to be part of this body. I am who I am. I can do what I can do. My brothers and sisters can do what they can do. It's all about Jesus anyway." Everyone in the church has different gifts given to us by God's grace. In vv. 6-8, Paul lists several of the different gifts that function in the church - prophecy, service, teaching, exhorting, giving, leading, and showing mercy. No one does it all, and no one needs to try and do it all. This is a hard lesson for the pastor. But I honor God when I appreciate that I am finite, that I am gifted to do some things better than others. And so it is with you.

The church should help its people identify those areas of gifting, and then give people the freedom to exercise those areas of gifting. One of the most helpful paradigms I have learned in these matters involves the offices of Christ.

Reformed theology teaches that Jesus is prophet, priest, and king. Likewise, he shares his offices with his people. The church is prophetic, priestly, and kingly. Yet within the church, each of us gravitates towards one of those offices more

than another. Because we are joined to Jesus, we all share in all the offices, but not equally. Think about the seven gifts listed in this passage.

The gifts of prophecy and teaching correspond to the prophetic office of Christ. The ongoing gift of prophecy is the ability to speak insight from God with clarity and humility. I take it for granted that prophecy is not about having elaborate visions and making pronouncements about sweeping geo-political matters. God does give people dreams and visions, but what I am more interested in is the ability that some people have to see inside things, to read situations, and consequently give good counsel. Teaching is the ability to bring forth truth from God's Word. These are both prophetic gifts in the broad sense that they are about declaring God's truth in the world. The gifts of service, exhortation, and showing mercy correspond to the priestly office of Christ. Cleaning tables, praying with the hurting, and coaching people with their finances display the kindness and empathy of Jesus. Giving and leading correspond to the kingly office of Jesus. To make decisions, to provide resources, and to administer funds are part of the package for some of God's people. The categories are not clean, by the way. It would be silly to try and pin God's generosity down to clear cut categories. But, in general, we move towards one direction or another. I am inclined to the prophetic office. Many of our deacons are of a priestly persuasion. Our folks who have owned businesses or administer programs are kings. There is a wonderful diversity and complementarity in the kingdom. And the point of these different roles is that churches grow to maturity and live out God's righteousness with one another and display God's righteousness to the world. So, what about you? Are you more of a prophet, a priest, or a king?

Relationships in the church. The church doesn't only function by means of roles and offices, but by the quality of its relationships. As v. 21 states, we are to be a community that is not overcome by evil but overcomes evil with good. We are not to be a community of either victims or victimizers. We are a community of overcomers. How can we be that kind of community? We need to follow through Paul's thoughts in vv. 9-20. He paints a picture of the healthy church. The issue here is certainly not disconnected from doctrine, but it is *more* than what can be expressed in doctrinal statements. Sincere love. Hatred for evil. Devotion. Falling over one another to give honor. Diligent. Fervent. Service-minded. Hopeful. Persevering. Prayerful. We are to be people who

bless persecutors and even “dump burning coals” on the heads of persecutors by treating them with kindness. We are not to seek our own vindication but rely on God’s final verdict. We need to be the kind of people who associate with the lowly, shun revenge, rejoice with the rejoicing, and weep with the weeping. The picture here is so moving that it may cause us to think, “Is this kind of community even possible?”

Two thoughts come to my mind - one of encouragement and the other of challenge. First, on our own this kind of community is not possible. But remember, we are united to Jesus, and he himself once identified himself as “gentle and lowly of heart.” The heart is the human person seen from the perspective of our deepest longings and desires. And Jesus says that at the depth of who he is and what he loves is gentleness and lowliness. God is kind. He is also just. His anger is proportionate to the reality of human sin. But don’t forget that he is kind. God gives mercy. God gives strength to the weary and hope to the burned out. When the Spirit of God grabs a hold of a church, possibilities for Christlikeness emerge in ways we never thought possible. We can learn to hate sin. We can learn to be radically forgiving. We can learn to obey God. We can learn to welcome the weak and the broken. We can, because God is faithful, and we are his people.

Second, God’s will for the church doesn’t change, no matter what is happening in our historical moment. We are dealing here with the absolute commands of Scripture. God does not give us permission to seek revenge when it seems expedient to do so. He does not give us permission to seek the fellowship of the powerful instead of the lowly because it is advantageous at the moment. We are always supposed to be like this. This call to be a congregation that overcomes evil with good never varies. We need to get our thoughts about God right. That is why God has given us the first eleven chapters of Romans. We need a missionary theology which declares God’s righteousness to the world. But we also need a community that is shaped by the heart of Jesus, a community in which minds are renewed and bodies are laid down as living sacrifices. You are good Presbyterian folk. Do you know the motto of John Calvin? “I offer my heart to thee, O Lord, promptly and sincerely.” Jesus has revealed his heart to you. As a church, let us offer our hearts to him.