

“YOU’VE GOT THE TIME 4 – ACTS TO CORINTHIANS”

Romans 12:1-21

I hope you’re finding the exercise of listening to the New Testament in fairly substantial chunks interesting and helpful. The material that accompanies the readings includes some sermon outlines, but they are on the whole of the section that has been read the week before, so this week’s text is *Acts 17 – 2 Corinthians* – quite an undertaking! We’ve had entire sermon series on sections of some of those books in the past. I suppose it would be possible to give a kind of lecture on the whole lot, but that’s more appropriate for a midweek study series than a Sunday morning, so I’ve decided to focus on one chapter of one letter this morning and use that to help us see something of the larger picture too. And, as you will, I hope, have worked out by now, that chapter is *Romans 12*.

Now Paul’s *Letter To The Romans* is a great letter. It has had a profound influence on the Christian Church down through the centuries and has been a powerful factor in the conversion and theology of such people as St Augustine, Martin Luther and Karl Barth – and it’s still at the heart of debate as people like Tom Wright and John Piper wrestle with the issues surrounding our justification before God. Paul wrote it from Corinth (which you can read about in *Acts 20:2,3* – his stay in Greece is pretty certainly Corinth) some time in the spring of AD57 while he was on his third preaching tour around the infant churches of the Mediterranean. He hadn’t been to Rome at this point and didn’t know the church there (although he clearly had links with a number of individuals there (as you can tell from chapter 16). Paul had been planning a trip to Spain and he wanted to visit the Roman Christians on the way there, so he wrote this letter to introduce himself to the church in advance of the trip.

And this introduction isn’t really an introduction of himself as a person – it’s not a CV or even a personal testimony. It’s a clear and systematic attempt to set out his understanding of the Good News about Jesus Christ, so the Roman Christians would know what they were getting when he arrived. It’s a kind of digest of his thinking which has become the basis for pretty well all Christian theology since. The first 11 chapters are closely argued theology, a reasoned explanation of what the heart of the Christian message is all about. He writes about sinful humanity and God’s decision to reconcile human beings with himself again. He intends to do it through Jesus, the Messiah, born of the Jewish people and in the tradition of their beliefs about God. But the possibility of reconciliation is, due to God’s amazing grace and mercy, open to everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity or background. When God made his promise to Abraham that he would save the world, he made that promise to Abraham as a representative of all humanity, not as a representative of the Jewish people. You can read about that in chapter 4.

We picked up the letter at the end of those 11 chapters, where the rubber really starts to hit the road. “OK,” says Paul, “you’ve heard all that. Now what are you going to do about it?” This Good News, this Gospel isn’t just a nice theory, a bit of abstruse theology to keep the scholars busy. This is soul-saving, life-changing, world-conquering stuff that needs to be lived out day by day by those who have taken the decision to follow the teachings of Jesus and rely on his sacrifice to bring us back to God. As in all his letters, Paul follows his otherwise rather theoretical arguments by showing how they are to affect our lives. You cannot believe this stuff without it affecting your life. So in this chapter Paul sets out three things that should characterise the lives of all those who claim to be disciples of Jesus. They are at the very heart of all that it means to be a Christian. Let’s look at them one by one.

1. TRANSFORMATION (vv1-3)

As we’ve just said, this good news about Jesus isn’t simply something to think about and to accept or reject, and that’s it. This is about a complete renewal of our attitudes. It means a completely different worldview. It means a totally transformed outlook on life. It means thinking in line with God’s word rather than the perceived wisdom of the world. And it means allowing that to shape our behaviour – our actions, our conversation, our relationships, our priorities – everything. And it’s the bit we never really get, isn’t it? We try to behave like Christians without thinking like Christians. We are still so influenced

by the values and attitudes of the world around us that our behaviour never really changes. We tinker with it all and try to modify what we do, but we still find ourselves following the agenda of the people amongst whom we live and work. If we really did allow our thinking to be changed, if we really did let the Holy Spirit transform our attitudes, then it would mean a great sacrifice on our part, says Paul: we would become “*living sacrifices*”, people who are constantly allowing what God’s word says to shape our way of life, even if it doesn’t seem to fit in with the agenda of those around us.

We are to be “*transformed by the renewing of our minds*” and to stop conforming to the “*pattern of this world*”. As J B Phillips memorably translates it, we are not to “*let the world squeeze us into its mould*”. Those values of material aspiration, ambition and acquisitiveness which characterise the world’s way of going on are not to be part of the attitudes of the Christian (as we shall see). Those who follow the way of Jesus Christ are to be distinctive people, people who stand out because they think about what they’re doing and why they’re doing it – and don’t follow slavishly the fashions, fads and fancies of those whose only concern is themselves and the temporal, tainted world in which they live. There is to be transformation, and that transformation is to be obvious in behaviour that flows from a totally different way of thinking about the world.

2. SERVICE (vv4-8)

The Christian who starts to have his or her attitudes renewed, transformed will start to see that he or she isn’t the centre of all things. God has given us all abilities, gifts and skills to use, not solely for our own ends and our own advancement, but for him. We are to start to look at ways in which we can ensure that the things God has given us are used in the service of the Body of Christ. In that way we can start to help each other, we can build each other up in our faith and in our understanding of God and his ways, we can make a real difference to others by the exercise of our natural gifts and our spiritual gifts.

But attitude comes into it again here. Notice the adverbs Paul uses here. (Adverbs in English are usually words ending in “-ly”.) We are to use our gifts “*generously ... diligently ... cheerfully*”. We are not to be stingy or mean-spirited about our abilities. (I have to confess that I wrote that sentence just after being very mean-spirited to Sally – that’s the trouble with this job: you really do have to practise what you preach!) If God has given you something to use for him, then do it with good grace. One of the great things about this church is that, by and large, people do stuff really cheerfully. It really does make a difference to the way people see you and therefore the way people start to think about God and his ways if you are prepared to serve them without hesitation (repetition or deviation!) or complaint – with a willing heart and a gracious smile.

3. LOVE (vv9-21)

You may have spotted, as we read this chapter, that it has some remarkable parallels with *1 Corinthians 13*, the great chapter we so often read at weddings and other occasions when we’re trying not to frighten off people who are not yet Christians. It’s all nice and warm and fluffy, isn’t it? Well, if we had time, we’d have a look at what Paul says in *1 Corinthians 13* and the context in which he says it and we’d find that it’s actually a pretty harsh bit of teaching which is anything but inoffensive to most people.

And this short passage here is full of pretty tough stuff about love. It’s not about curling up in front of the fire with Barry White on the stereo and a glass of wine in your hand, concentrating on yourself and the one you’re with. It’s about a love which is outward looking, which sees beyond the immediate. Again, look at the words Paul uses here – and Paul is someone who is very good with words, having been trained as a lawyer amongst other things. He talks of “*love, honour*” (v10), “*share*” (v13), “*practise hospitality*” (v13), “*bless*” (v14) and there are lots of “*with*”s – you don’t do any of these things on your own. It’s sacrificial love. It’s a love that is active, that does things for others. It’s a love that helps us to

“live at peace” – and the implication is that you are to try and do that even when it’s not always appreciated: Paul writes “*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you ...*”.

And this is still transformative, because what Paul closes this chapter with is an exhortation to “*overcome evil with good*”. Now, that’s not going to be possible if your thought processes, your attitudes, your worldview are still being influenced by the attitudes of those who are not yet Christians, who do not have the same outlook on service, sacrifice and love that you do.

This is all very difficult stuff. It might seem easy as we read it on the page. After all, for many of us this is probably very familiar ground. We’ve heard it all before. But the question remains – are we doing it? Are we being transformed? Are we truly serving God and others? Are we loving as God loves us – unconditionally and sacrificially? It’s vital that we consider these questions if we are to make any headway in our own Christian lives and if we are to make any headway in reaching out to the community, to a world that is already very suspicious of religion and the religious. But these three key issues are found in all the books we’ve been listening to this week. You will find transformation, service and love, firstly ...

A. EXEMPLIFIED IN ACTS

The book of *Acts* is part of the story of the new church of Jesus Christ. It describes the birth pangs and the growing pains of this new movement through which God’s Holy Spirit was starting to change the world. Luke, the doctor who accompanied Paul on his preaching tours, wrote it all down having researched it all pretty meticulously. It’s the story of men and women who lived differently and thought differently. It is a narrative of transformation. From the very beginning we read of men and women whose lives were changed dramatically – the disciples, Cornelius, the Ethiopian official, the Philippian jailer, Paul himself. And those changed lives led to new attitudes – sharing, support, encouragement, giving, prayer – and sacrificial behaviour as some of them gave up careers, sold property, underwent hardship and danger, faced torture and persecution for the cause of Christ. And because of all that the Christians stood out – Peter and John had obviously been with Jesus (*Acts 4:13*), Stephen positively glowed with the power of the Holy Spirit, Paul attracted the attention of Festus and Agrippa.

Luke tells us all about this astonishing new community that spread rapidly from its base in Jerusalem across the Mediterranean area. The followers of Jesus had a powerful impact on the cities of the Roman Empire and they saw amazing things happening. Their lives were never the same again. The things which they had believed up until then needed to be adjusted in the light of this new gospel. It was all new and startling to them.

B. EXPLAINED IN ROMANS

As all these things were happening in all kinds of new and unsettling ways, there was a need to try and make sense of it all. The experiences of Peter, John, Paul, Silas and the others needed to be explained and they tried to fit it into what they already believed, to relate it to the things that God had said in the past. So Paul, in his introductory letter to the Christians in Rome, takes the opportunity to try and set it all in some kind of context. As you read through this letter, you’ll see how Paul links these new experiences, this new teaching to an understanding of human sinfulness in chapters 1-3. He then explains something of God’s activity in trying to resolve the innate problems caused by human sin – not least the fact that it affects everyone (*3:23*) and that it cuts us off from God (*6:23*). There are some wonderful passages and some great phrases that describe and sum up what God’s all about in this. Just look at *5:8* or *11:33-36*.

Paul sets all this out for the Roman Christians – and for all generations, as men and women down through the centuries have looked to this letter for help in understanding their own situations and for encouragement to try and transform them. *Romans* is a great explanation of what God’s grace is all about

and why we so desperately needed it to be shown. Of course, it has also provided plenty of material for scholars and academics down through the centuries too, who have tried to explain further what Paul is saying – or, often, tried to explain *away* what Paul is saying! The exercise we've been following may well have been helpful in that because it means you can hear the sweep of Paul's argument in one go, rather than in bite-sized chunks which you don't always manage to relate to each other.

C. EXHORTED IN CORINTHIANS

But, of course, the new Christians didn't always get it first time – and, like most of us, found real difficulty putting it all into practice. There are odd bits in *Acts* of the problems faced by the early Church, but Paul has to address some of those problems head on in his letters. Paul hadn't known the Roman Christians, so his letter doesn't confront any specific issues, simply sets out the gospel message. The Corinthian Christians he does know – after all, as we've already noted, he spent some time there and he had clearly had some letters from them which raised particular points (*1 Corinthians 1:11*) – so he deals with their problems head on. It's a shame, really, that we don't have Chloe's letter or any of the other stuff Paul had been sent by people in Corinth, because he doesn't re-state the problem, only offers solutions.

And the problems were clearly those of Christians who were trying to live according to the way of Jesus Christ, but without the transformed attitudes. They were still involved in all kinds of sexual shenanigans, falling out with each other, trying to look after themselves first and foremost (the things he says about their behaviour at communion are to do with greed and selfishness), and living as if the end justified the means all the time. There's some pretty tough talking in the first letter and in the second letter we have (there was clearly another one in between which we don't have any more) Paul is clearly very angry with them for their attitudes and behaviour.

And, particularly in the first letter, he puts them right by talking about just the things we've noticed in *Romans 12* but at greater length. He writes in some detail about their service, the use of their gifts in the wonderful passage about all being part of the one body of Christ. There is that splendid chapter on love which we've already mentioned. And there's some uncompromising stuff about not having the attitudes of ambition, rivalry and arrogance that so often characterise the world's way of thinking. Basically, he is exhorting them to be transformed, to serve each other and to show real love.

So this section of the New Testament is very much about Christian behaviour, but behaviour that springs from truly, sacrificially, transformed attitudes. We need to look at it all, really, to take it all very seriously. It's important that we know what our faith is all about – that's the *Romans* bit, really. But that faith has to make a clear difference in our lives or it is just a load of head knowledge that will do no-one any good in the long run. But, on the other hand, our behaviour really does need to have a strong basis in that faith, a faith which affects our attitudes and our thinking just as much as our words and our actions. You cannot be an effective Christian without a good grasp of what it is you believe. But that has then to be demonstrated by a true change in lifestyle and worldview. Be encouraged that the problems you face are not new – they were problems that the very first Christians encountered. And be encouraged as you seek to live up to the standards God expects that there is plenty of help for you here in the New Testament, and plenty of help from the Holy Spirit, too.

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The problems in Corinth were clearly those of Christians who were trying to live according to the way of Jesus Christ, but without the transformed attitudes. Paul puts them right by talking about just the things we've noticed in *Romans 12* but at greater length.

Questions for discussion

1. How would you describe the *Letter to the Romans*? Do you find it an easy book? Why/why not?
2. Do we really need such long explanations as we find in *Romans*? Why can't we just get on and live as Jesus taught us?
3. Why is it so difficult to transform our attitudes? Why is it not possible to change our behaviour without changing our attitudes?
4. What do you understand by "love" as Paul writes about it?
5. Why do we need stories (*Acts*), doctrine (*Romans*) and instruction (*Corinthians*) if we are to live As Christians? What do you find most helpful? Why?