

## To Help Us Be And Make Disciples

Romans 12:1-3, 12:9-21

// I wonder if you're good or bad at hospitality - at entertaining guests and making them feel welcome. Does it give you joy and pleasure to look after others, or fill you with a sense of worry and dread? I'm ashamed to say that I'm not the most gifted of hosts - I'm much more interested in sitting with others and talking rather than being up on my feet preparing refreshments for people.

I'm told that once, as a young man when I was last working with Youth With A Mission, my parents had driven me up to Derby after a break - and I don't really have any memory of this happening, so I'm taking it on trust - and on arrival I disappeared without a trace into the building. After a bit of looking around, my poor parents discovered me in a room sitting in a comfy chair reading a book, without a second thought to the possibility of even offering a cup of tea or even a place to sit down in gratitude for the transport.

I am ashamed. I am trying to get better at being a good host. I'm sure that over time, this can happen.

In chapter 12 of Paul's letter to the Romans, we are taught a number of ways we can be changed from our old ways and made new, into people who more closely resemble Jesus, and this is done through the transformation of the Spirit, love, and resisting the urge to do things our own way.

*"Therefore,"* Paul begins - a pastor friend of mine once said when we hit this word, it's good to ask the question, "What's the 'therefore' there for?"

This is a therefore of dedication. In Romans 11, Paul has been explaining how God has made a covenant with us, and has dedicated himself to us.

*Therefore,* we are all called to do the same, to dedicate ourselves, our lives, our whole beings to him. Not out of placation or subservience - that is, not to satisfy his anger, or lower ourselves in a simpering fashion - but in freedom, joy, and hope.

// These first two verses show us three areas in which we are called to give ourselves in dedication;

*“Therefore, (in the light of God’s dedication to us) I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God - this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”*

Firstly, we give our bodies as a ‘living sacrifice’. Jesus gave his own life for us, so we are called to do the same, although not necessarily in the same way. It’s a shocking image, to consider placing our own, literal physical body onto an altar as a personal submission and sacrifice.

When Paul says ‘a living sacrifice’, I want to suggest that he’s saying that we *actually* should have to do this. But the further point is that we don’t have to anymore, because Christ has done it in our place. On our own, we don’t have the power over death, but Christ does. By living a perfect life, dying an awful death, and raising to glorious new life, he welcomes us into a new hope.

Secondly, we resist the thought patterns of this world, and as a result we become more able to clearly detect God’s voice and will.

*“Don’t conform to the pattern of this world,”* Paul writes to the Romans. The management consultant Peter Drucker once said, “Culture eats strategy for breakfast.” We can have the best, most inspiring plans, but if the surrounding culture doesn’t buy it, you’ll get nowhere fast.

We have a responsibility here. We are responsible for our own spiritual growth - not me, not your pastor, or your church, or the quality of your bible notes - it’s our own responsibility. We will have to be the ones to set the standard for ourselves, *with* the Spirit. But what do we base this on? We base this standard for our own growth on what God has done for us, in His mercy.

So rather than conforming, we are told to *“be transformed by the renewing of [our minds]”*. The word ‘transformed’ is the same as the one used in the gospels for ‘transfigured’ - it’s a metamorphosis, a change from within. We are being called to transform, and not to conform.

We don't become something or someone else, but we're made *more* like himself. The author John Ortberg once said that "God wants to make you *youier*."

And how does this transformation take place? "But the renewing of your mind." I wonder how many of us truly understand this. I know I'm not sure I do, I don't think I've ever quite managed to fully comprehend what this really looks like.

We're all very good at 'being Christians', aren't we. We can come along on Sunday, sing the songs, listen to the sermons, pray the prayers, and drink the coffee, but really at a week to week level we continue to think like everybody else.

We make decisions about our money like the rest of the world, without asking God what using our money might look like if we used it with a Kingdom perspective. We buy our food from the supermarket without considering how God feels about the chickens we buy that are battery farmed and pumped full of water, even though He's called us all to look after the land and be good stewards of it. But it's cheaper, right? So it's ok?

I'm saying this more to myself than the rest of us, but I really do wonder what it would look like if we had the guts to stand up and say "No." To just stop, breathe for a moment, and spend some time with the Spirit asking Him, "Lord, show me how you want me to live."

But how often do we do that? Not very. It's too risky. What if we hear or discern something that means we have to change something about the way we live?

But the reality is, this doesn't have to be scary. If anything, it's more likely to be thrilling. The Spirit is our counselor and comforter - if we allow Him, we will find that over time our minds are renewed by the gentle persuasion of the Spirit.

Thirdly, as we come to know God's will, we follow Him with humility, just as Jesus did by doing what the Father told Him. Jesus knew through and through that His Father loved Him. If we have the unconditional love of the Father, the creator of the universe, why would we have any need to think more highly of ourselves than we ought?

Consider how exciting it would be to meet a celebrity who you introduced yourself to, only to perhaps see them again on another occasion and they not only remembered your face, but your name, and maybe some details about you.

How much more remarkable is it then, that the Lord of heaven and earth knows you by name, and knows everything about you. All the things that make you tick and all the things that get you down. It's amazing.

Why would we have any need then, to go after one-upmanship and ego stroking? Or worse, as one commentator has put it, "nothing causes more damage in the local church than believers who overrate themselves and try to perform a ministry that they cannot do."

// Paul goes on to affirm that "*Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*" Some translations say "Love must be genuine," so that means not hypocritical.

Let's be very honest, it's generally quite easy to see through a fake smile, but there's also something kind of sad about it too. But if we are to achieve this - to have genuine love for others - how can we possibly do this with those people, when we're honest with ourselves, we find difficult or even really don't like?

Part of the answer is found in the fact that this isn't about our feelings.

At the start of the marriage course, there are some quotes from people who were asked "what is love?" and one person replied, "Love is a feeling you feel when you feel like you're going to feel something you've never felt before."

I hate to break it to you, but love isn't a feeling. It might have the potential to give you feelings, but it isn't one. Thinking back to the earlier point about conforming and transforming, and culture dominating our worthy attempts, perhaps our culture has managed to get us confused between emotions and feelings.

And love - love goes beyond feelings, it goes beyond emotions.  
God Himself IS love.

With genuine love, we can move beyond our feelings and reach out to those we might otherwise find it really difficult to be around. It means we stop judging each other and start treating everyone like .. human beings.

It's absolutely vital that we are genuine in our love, because if we're not, there is great scope for hurt to be done to others and to ourselves. Did you realise that it's entirely possible to use spiritual gifts in unspiritual ways? Or 'unbiblical' ways, if that language helps. It's spiritual abuse, and it happens all the time when we aren't genuine with each other, or when we use our own spirituality to get one up on someone else or show how gifted we are. Again, *"do not think of yourself more highly than you ought."*

Paul goes on; *"Be devoted to one another in love."* There it is again, that call to devotion, this time to each other.

In the book of Acts we see how the early church did amazingly at serving each others needs. They were really good at sharing what they had and making sure that no one was in need, especially those who were especially poor. They didn't have a set of standards or expectations, they just shared.

How often do we decide if someone is worthy or deserving of aid by judging them according to how we might perceive their situation as being the result of their own choices? Does it even matter?

*"Be joyful in hope,"* Paul continues, *"patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need."*

When we do these things *as if* we love (and this is not the same as hypocrisy), genuine love and concern is born in us. As I say, this is not the same as being false or wearing a facade, but more like practising a skill by doing it more often. It might *feel* a little forced if we are taken out of our comfort zones, but sincerity is still sincerity.

When I was last working with YWAM, I spent some time in Brazil where I had the opportunity to visit a psychiatric hospital to spend time with some of the patients there. It was not an easy situation for me, and it made me uncomfortable at times. But the humility I felt, by being given the opportunity to spend time with these people who had needs very different to my own, did a deep work in me. I felt a love and a concern for them despite having never met them before.

And “*Practice hospitality.*” As I’ve said, this is an area I desperately need to grow in. Many of you here are wonderfully gifted hosts, some of us not some much, perhaps. But we must be genuine and sincere. This is a message for all of us. It may require patience through difficult times.

Paul goes on to say “*Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position.*”

Basil Fawlty, the moustachioed misanthrope played by John Cleese in the sitcom Fawlty Towers famously insisted on welcoming no ‘riff raff’ into his poor quality Torquay hotel, and as a result consistently alienated himself from everybody, no matter their class. Do we welcome anybody, no matter their situation or where they have come from? Do we run the risk of ignoring some at the cost of losing others, too?

//As Paul continues in his letter to the Romans, he talks about how we have a tendency to take justice into our own hands. We have a habit of not trusting God to see that justice will ultimately be done.

“*Do not repay evil for evil ... Do not take revenge, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay.’*”

Do not repay evil for evil. Seems obvious, but why not? Because evil is *evil*. We all know that two wrongs don't make a right. Two negative numbers don't balance out. Revenge is not an option. It just isn't. But why?

Because of how Jesus has set the standard for how to live as a human. Earlier in Romans 5:6-11 Paul writes "*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*" Revenge will continue among those who don't know Christ, because his moral governance has not been put at the centre.

But let's face it, forgiveness is often not an easy thing. And what about when someone has wronged us, and shows no sign of even being sorry - is it even possible to forgive, then? It probably has to be, but it isn't easy.

And *that's* why it's up to us to let Christ's rule and reign be at work, because He's done it. He's done it all for us.

When trying to resolve a conflict, sometimes it's not appropriate to say "it's ok" right away, even if the person has apologised, to make the point that the consequences are important. That's part of the reason we have a legal system in place, those who do wrong have to be taken through a period of rehabilitation. It's not always good enough just to say "sorry."

But in Christ, we are saved *and* sanctified. When we repent, we are made "ok", we are made righteous.

When Jesus was faced with a woman who had been caught in adultery - I use this example so often, because it works so well and it's deeply challenging - He says "*neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more.*"

So, who are we to condemn others? Better than Jesus? I don't think so. It just doesn't follow.

So if we don't take matters into our own hands and get back at others, what are we to do? Paul says "*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.*"

It's what we might want to call 'acting in the opposite spirit.' At the very least, as one commentator has put it, "we are taking responsibility for our own mental and emotional [and I'd add physical] health. It's bad enough that they've done whatever it was, why should they have the right to keep us in a bitter and twisted state?"

So today, may we move one more step forward into the ongoing transformation that the Spirit is at work in us, conforming our bodies, our minds, and our wills.

May we have a love that is genuine and sincere, reaching out to others in hospitality.

And may we recognise that revenge is not ours for the taking, but may we trust in the supreme justice of Almighty God.

**Chris Marsh // 1st June 2014**