

Belonging Together in Christ: Part 1

Romans 12:3-8

If you heard me say to a person, “you need to sober up”. What comes to mind? Someone is drunk. Their judgement is impaired. They’ve ‘lost their good senses’ and might do harm to themselves or others.

I encounter an impaired person as I was almost at the door of the chapel... What’s going to help them?

Dotox...and the Lord. But they must want the help.

There’s another way judgement gets impaired.

Any one of us can be impaired with the influence of worldly thinking. It leads to damaging self-talk. It hinders the work of God’s Spirit to make each of us more like Christ...and fitted together with His people. If I’ve ‘lost my good senses’ about who I am in Christ – how can I expect to relate God’s grace to others well? Today, we begin to mine the riches of God’s word about His design for us. And how we belong together in Christ. You and me together in Christ. And the secret to experiencing God’s grace through one another (open, loving, healing, encouragement, faith building, and guidance toward maturity)...is not by trying harder to be nice.

Prayer

Last lesson in Romans we found that we are to be a people gripped by the

wonder of God’s grace. Every time we enter this place we should notice that old wooden cross of torture and sacrifice. And notice that it is empty because Jesus lives today to intercede for us as King of heaven. The empty cross and empty grave guarantees eternal life with Him for all who believe.

When I think about what I might have become and done with my life with out Him...I just have to stop and say, “Thank you Lord, for your mercy.”

What’s the best way to express thanks to God? Commitment. We owe God our very lives. Commitment is like handing God a blank cheque with a note saying, “I am yours”. And God is pleased with such an offering.

So how do we begin offering our bodies as a living sacrifice to God? What does God want?

Right thinking trusts God over and over to lead us into the power of the Gospel. In R 12, we’ve been urged to say ‘no’ to the pressing schemes of this present evil age and ‘yes’ to seeking God’s will (Spirit-led).

Extra Review

Resist schemes of this present evil age (R12:2) which appeals to our old nature (1 Jn 2:15-17):

- the lust of the flesh: ungodly desire to satisfy physical wants

- the lust of the eyes: see and desire to own or possess contrary to God's will
- the pride of life: arrogance and boasting that come from exalting self above others, especially God.

Instead, be transformed by the renewing of your mind. We turn away from the influences of the world to be fed, instead by God's truth. God's Spirit renews our minds to be more and more Christ-like.

Growing in the Word

Peter exhorts new believers to crave the Gospel like pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation (1 Pet 2:2). As you grow in maturity you taste and see that the Lord is faithful in everyday life (big and small things). You explore more of God's Word for yourself. You are no longer dependent on others for the elementary truths of the Gospel. You learn to discern good and evil by the Spirit's work in your study. And you begin helping others grow in their faith and understanding of God's truth. So they can feed themselves and help others move from milk to the meat of the word – understanding God's righteousness and living it out (Heb 5:13-15).

I thought of some personal examples where I know it's the Spirit's leading not let my mind 'go with the flow'. Shifting my eyes off the headlines and suggestive images at the checkout counter magazine rack. And instead, thinking about whatever is true and noble. Turning off that screen when the mind is tiring and get the rest I need to enter the next day...seeking God's will. How about praying for help

when growing impatient standing in line...fielding a phone call from a solicitor... explaining to a child why we don't do finger painting on other people's muddy car. Under the Spirit's control, a miracle happens – we discern what God's will is: in big ways and small ways. When we love God, we want to know His will for us. Right thinking help us know and follow God's will.

In General, the best way to renew our minds is filling our mind with the Word of God. As we enter the Christmas season, remember that Jesus was called the Word (logos) who became a human baby to live among us (Jn 1). He was literally the living word of God. Scripture was His sword against the enemy and light for the blind. He taught the disciples God's word and they believed. And now we have His truth in our hands and His Spirit in our hearts - to live by. Let's get a firm grip on God's Word. For our benefit and the benefit of others that God sends our way.

Read R12:3: Grace-Given

Don't miss the tone of Paul's appeal to us. "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you." Paul recognizes the position he speaks from...an apostle chosen by Christ...by God's grace. He used to throw believers to the wolves...and enemy of Jesus. Paul is a

grace-given person who shares God's gift with the full power God intends. He does not lord his authority in Christ over his readers. Instead, as you study the many letters of Paul, you will find a humble man of God who knows his place as a thankful servant. A gift of God's grace is a gift. Paul is grace-given and has a gift of God to pass on. I want you to hear how important it is to Paul..to share His grace gift.

Read R1:9-13.

Let that idea stick: Paul is a grace-given person. You are a grace-given person. I am a grace-given person.

When you give a person a birthday gift...you hope the person responds with a 'thank you'. You don't expect that person to begin boasting about how they deserve your gift because of all the work they did to be born. If anything, that person owes it all to his poor mother who carried him, went into labor and kept him alive after (with that kind of attitude...sometimes sorry she did).

How can subjects of God's mercy withhold the grace He wants to pass on through us? Our ultimate example is our Savior – who became a servant to all (Phil 2).

So what is God's direction for us? It comes in the form of a negative-positive. (i.e. Don't whine, ask nicely)

A. Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought:

Hollywood would kids dreaming of being superheros, right? And the parents help them come back down to earth...hopefully. Canadians get ticked off with braggers because in our own 'more refined' way...we're better. Why does Paul just mention regarding ourselves more highly than we ought? What about those who regard themselves as pitiful creatures to be loathed? Self-demeaning thoughts also impair judgement. God cares about the downtrodden, the heavy laden...victims of human abuse and attacks from the enemy. One need look no further than Jesus, to know that He stood up for those being marginalized and abused. And the establishment hated Him for it. Paul's warning about being intoxicated with a puffed-up importance fits with the Jew-Gentile, weaker-stronger and Master-slave issues in Rome. But it also fits well with his next illustration and application. An over-estimation of one's importance will become a frustrating experience for the whole church...something God never intended.

B. But rather think of yourself with sober judgement

Jesus teaches: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matt 5:3). They realize they are saved by grace.

Ok, but what's the measure for right thinking – for sound judgement.

What's the standard?

In accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.

There's a couple ways to see this standard of judgement. Is it an individual thing? Each person has their own measure of faith from God? Or is this standard of judgement based on one understanding of faith that every believer has been given? Or a bit of both? When I look for an answer to a question like that, I look at the context. Paul sets this whole section up by urging us to keep in mind God's mercies. God has distributed to each believer in Rome...and us, a saving faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God. **1. The Gospel is the lens to see ourselves through.** We get sobered up when we think about how God sees us! (see handout). Before we believed, we were sinners condemned to hell. But now, you are no longer condemned, but hidden in Christ (Col 3:3). You are chosen for good and you are righteous to Him. You belong in God's family right now and you suit His purposes. You have God's help now and a future hope with Him forever. God's love for you never fails.

When we see ourselves in the light of the Gospel, the next big thought is that God sees my brothers and sisters the same way. If I 'look down' on

another believer as 'high maintenance' or 'immature' or too...(you fill in the blank), I'm criticising the very One I'm supposed to honor with my life. The One who has mercy on me for no reason I deserve. So the Gospel gives us great worth and great humility.

Lets consider the other idea: that God grants us each a unique measure to faith. In view of the larger body of scriptures **individual faith comes into play as well.** There would be different measures of faith based on one's experience of God. Someone who has lived decades of trusting God and finding Him faithful would have a different faith level from a newborn or toddler believer in some ways. God is the one who distributes faith (Eph 2:8-9). Jesus taught His followers that God distributes different portions of responsibility to His people. In the parable of the talents, it was expected that each servant-no matter how much was entrusted to them – to put the master's property to good use. This involved taking risks to multiply its value (Matt 25:14-30). More risk, more faith. Yet, the one who blew it had the least to lose. One must be willing to step out in faith if they are to experience all that God has for them. Jesus also taught, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded (Luke 12:48). No matter how much one has been given, faithfulness is important to God. Without faith it is impossible

to please God (Heb 11:6). Even the smallest gesture of trust, “Lord, help my unbelief” evokes God’s grace (Mark 9:24). Even a mustard seed of faith – God will use powerfully (Matt 17:14-20, Lk 17:6). We need to exercise faith (be Spirit-led) to discern God’s will and discover what He is pleased to direct us into.

Personal Example: faith over fear in bear country

So, the standard we use to measure ourselves is first, the Gospel AND then the measure of faith God gives. And no matter how much...it is to be exercised faithfully. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven!

If the estimation I have of myself is too high (by comparing myself to others), I may end up in the sticky situation where I assumed to be God’s pick for a roll or task...that hinders God’s work in the church. Because a person far more suited is passed over. It would be best that I be corrected (ie by an elder).

Unfortunately in Canadian churches...that doesn’t happen enough. It’s difficult and unpopular to correct a person but if it’s in obedience to God, it’s the right thing to do. Because God works through discipline like a good Father. When correction is absent, fear of man has crept up past fear of God. And that is not being a ‘living sacrifice’ for God.

Before we move on I think it’s important to note that some people committed to God feel inadequate or guilty about fulfilling all kinds of service needs in the community and the church. While others equally committed, seem to experience peace and effectiveness. I mean ministry that extends God’s grace in a way that is mutually building up love and faith. One person has a sober-self assessment of how God see them and what God has assigned them to do. Another person seems to get pulled in several directions...often doing what other people think they should do, or picking up things ‘left undone’ by others. How can she be helped?

Read v4-5: Belonging in Christ

The more disconnected Martha is from God’s family, the less she will see God’s fit for her with others in Christ. Paul’s body illustration emphasizes why it’s important to have a good estimation of how God sees us and what His will is for us. We need to see ourselves as connected to Jesus Christ (the head) AND to other believers in the same way that our physical organs are connected to the whole body and other organs. I had to take anatomy and physiology to become a Phys. Ed. Teacher. And it was a bear to memorize all that stuff. I think I had to take it twice. We have connections upon connections upon connections.

The closer you can look with a microscope, the more you find how interconnected we are...from skin to muscles and tendons and bones to blood vessels and nerves and cells. Paul expands this illustration in his letter to the troubled Corinthian church. God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. Unique parts and many parts (1 Cor 12:18-20). And God has mixed in parts that seem weaker or less honorable...yet all are vital for the church to realize His will and so that there would be no divisions. Just like His design of a human body, the gathered believers each should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers. Ever stubbed your toe because your eyes couldn't see in the dark? If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it (1

Cor 12:22-26).

The honor you show Darlene and I (like the love offering in November) is deeply felt. At first, I was embarrassed...I didn't know how to feel. This year we missed it in a way...and we realized how much we need your expressions of love and honor as much as you appreciate us. That's a God grace thing.

We fit into a larger plan. Yes, we come to a faith in Christ individually and we experience a personal relationship

with Him. But much of what God wants to give us...in the way of a relationship, He has chosen to make available through other believers. Our commitment to God, connects us to His family...weird and wonderful as we are. It takes some rearranging in our life. There's some risk. It takes faith to obey the Spirit, telling you to pass on God's grace. But we only have one life to live. And God made us to belong together in Christ.

Paul will move from this simple illustration into how we see this in real life. Through His grace gifts to us. It makes each of us valuable and needing each other for growth. We will continue Romans in the New Year. Next week we explore the wonder of Jesus...before He came in the flesh and as a baby born – the Prince of Peace.

I believe we all need to be refreshed in our thinking...about who we are in Christ. Please take the handout 'Mind Renewal for the Believer' along with an invitation to Christmas Eve. There are also Gospel tracts for the season.