



ROMANS

PART TWO

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THE RIVER CHURCH

REACH | GATHER | GROW

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PREFACE

The late great preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones called the book of Romans “of first importance” in the New Testament epistles. He demonstrated this by preaching verse by verse, through the book every Friday night for 12 years! He preached a total of 366 sermons and only made it to Chapter 14 before he died. Those sermons were eventually compiled and edited into books and his Romans commentary set came in at 14 volumes with over 5000 pages!

Martin Luther said, “This epistle [Romans] is really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel. It is worthy not only that every Christian should know it word for word, by heart, but also that he should occupy himself with it every day, as the daily bread of the soul. We can never read it or ponder over it too much; for the more we deal with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.”

John Wesley merely heard someone reading Luther’s preface to the book of Romans and said that his heart was “strangely warmed.” It was at that moment that he was converted to Christ and became the catalyst of the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century. The beloved (and second best-selling book in history) *“Pilgrim’s Progress”* was written by John Bunyan as he studied the great themes of Romans while sitting in jail in Bedford. John Calvin wrote, “When anyone understands this Epistle, he has a passage opened to him to the understanding of the whole Scripture.”

“Romans: Part Two” is the second part of a series that contains 13 study guides for personal study or a group discussion and 78 devotions applying the truths to everyday life. *“Romans: Part Two”* will help convince you that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. *“Romans: Part Two”* will also convict you how to competently and confidently live out your salvation.

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also

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to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Romans 1:16-17

The background of the entire page is a light-colored marbled paper with swirling patterns of white, grey, and pale blue. The marbling is most prominent on the left side, where it forms a large, flowing shape that extends towards the center.

ROMANS

Lesson 1

Reach

ROMANS ROAD

Pastor Roy Townsend

As a teacher, I often used techniques to help my students remember what they needed for the assessments that were coming up. We would use mnemonics or systems and tricks that make information more memorable. Many times, we used this system by remembering a phrase where the first letter of each word in the phrase is also the first letter of each word in the list or order. Also, these tricks can just be a word or name that will help you recall the information. It is now time for a pop quiz! The answers will be at the end of the lesson. No cheating, and keep your eyes on your own paper.

1. Math - What is the order or list that this phrase means: Please Excuse My Dear Aunt Sally?

2. Science - What is the order or list for this name: ROY-G-BIV?

3. Michigan History - What is the order or list for the word: H.O.M.E.S.?

When I was growing up, we were taught the Romans Road as a memory device to help us reach others with the truth of Jesus Christ. In 1 Peter 3:15, we read, ***“But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”*** We wanted to be prepared, but we would often get nervous about remembering which verses explained salvation in Christ, help each person understand

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their condition, understand who Christ is, or what would be required of us as a price for our sins. However, we knew we would need to do this with **“gentleness and respect.”** We were taught the truths of God’s Scripture through a memory device called the Romans Road. It really is an easy method for explaining to others why we need salvation in Christ.

4. Can you think of any other memory devices that are used to store God’s Word in your heart? What are they? (Hint: Songs)

5. Do you consider **“gentleness and respect”** when you are trying to reach an individual for Christ? Why or why not?

The first verse helps us to explain our situation or our condition because many do not believe that there is a need for Christ’s intervention in their eternal life. Romans 3:23 reads, **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** This is a pretty important first and easy step. I would ask people, “Do you believe that we all do things that would be considered bad, and are these wrong things considered a sin?” Then, I would turn them to Romans 3:23 and make sure that they pick up on the idea that we all sin and that sin falls short of God’s standard.

6. Why do people struggle with this concept? Please share.

The second verse of the Romans Road will make it clear and teach us about the consequences of sin or the wrongs that we do in our lives. However, this same verse will begin the understanding of the gift that Jesus gives to us. Romans 6:23 reads, ***“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** I often get the opportunity to explain “wages” to children. I let them know when they work, they will make money, which is called their wages. You deserve your wages for your work. In this passage, the wages for our sin is called death. So, if you work, does your boss give you a gift, or do they give you your wages? Wages is the answer, but God gives you the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus.

7. Do you think the concept of wages and gift is a helpful way to explain this concept? Why or why not?

The third verse that I use when speaking to someone from the Romans Road is Romans 5:8, ***“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** Not only is Jesus giving us a gift, but we must know what Christ did. Jesus Christ died for us! He paid the price for the consequences of our sins. This shows us how much He loves us and that love was given even when we were still sinners. How beautiful a love He demonstrates to us.

8. For this verse, I sometimes use the concept of Christ’s blood being given on the cross as He died for us. Would there be another verse that you use to back up this stop on the Romans Road?

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The fourth verse on the Romans Road is Romans 10:9, ***“Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.”*** Romans 10:13 adds, ***“For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’”*** This is an exciting stop on the Romans Road. Because Jesus died as a payment for my sins, I can have the free gift of salvation by confessing that Jesus’ death is what I trust in for my salvation. I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, and through this, I am saved from what is required, which is death.

9. Would you think it would be beneficial to introduce the concept of Hell in the Romans Road? What verse would you include?

The last stop for me on the Romans Road speaks to the outcome of our new position with Christ. Romans 5:1 reads, ***“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** We are now justified, which means that we do not owe any wages. We have peace with God because, without Jesus, we are enemies of God. This all comes about because Jesus Christ died for our sins and made us children of God.

10. What are some verses that you would use that describe us as enemies of God or children of God?

11. Were there other verses that you were taught to use on the Romans Road?

Answer Key:

1. Math - Order of Operations:
 - Parentheses
 - Exponents
 - Multiply
 - Divide
 - Add
 - Subtract

2. Science - Colors of the Rainbow:
 - Red
 - Orange
 - Yellow
 - Green
 - Blue
 - Indigo
 - Violet

3. Michigan History - Names of Great Lakes
 - Huron
 - Ontario
 - Michigan
 - Erie
 - Superior

NOTES

ROMANS

DEVOTION 1 **BORN LOSERS**

PASTOR CALEB COMBS

As we examine the Romans Road, we begin with the concept of total depravity. It is the idea that human beings are born lost, broken, and inherently sinful. We possess no inherent goodness. In theological terms, this means we are born with a sinful nature, a disposition opposed to the things of God. Romans 5:12 explains, ***“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”*** Through Adam’s sin, we had death, destruction, and a sinful nature enter the world.

This concept can be challenging to accept. You might think, “But I know good and kind people. Are you saying they are depraved if they are not saved?” Yes, and Romans 3:10-11 makes this clear: ***“As it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God.’”***

As a parent, I have witnessed this firsthand. I have three children, and while I am not naturally drawn to the baby stage, I enjoy them more once they are potty-trained and able to communicate. However, even as toddlers, their selfish tendencies were unmistakable. I did not have to teach them to throw tantrums or yell, “Mine!” It is astonishing to see those selfish desires emerge so naturally, but that is precisely what depravity describes. They, and all of us, are hardwired in opposition to God. Romans 3:18 sheds light on this: ***“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”***

The sad reality is that sin has left all people lost in darkness and without hope. There is no goodness in us apart from God. Yet, through the sacrifice of Jesus, we can find light and hope. I love the timeless statement, “There is no good in me without the God in me.”

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When you become a Christian, the Holy Spirit comes to live within you, providing a compass that directs and guides you toward the things of God.

We have all seen the darkness of the world. Whether it is on television or social media, depravity is evident everywhere. Thankfully, God, Who is rich in mercy, did not leave us in that darkness. Instead, He offered us salvation. It is an opportunity to be rescued from sin and its consequences.

DEVOTION 2

DO YOU MEASURE UP?

PASTOR GARY WRIGHT

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Romans 3:23

John Phillips shared this story in his commentary:

Two men went to the recruiting office in London to join a guards regiment. The standard height for a guardsman was a minimum of six feet. One man was taller than the other, but when they were measured officially, both were disqualified. The shorter of the two measured only five feet seven inches and was far too short; his companion measured five feet eleven and a half inches and, stretching to his utmost as he did, he could not make it any more. Nor did his pleas avail. It mattered nothing that his father was a guardsman, that he promised to be a good soldier, that he had already memorized the drills and knew army regulations by heart. He was short of the standard.

There is a standard for getting into Heaven as well. However, it is a lot more difficult than a height requirement. We must measure up to God's standard which is perfection. In the Bible, God gives us His holy standard for living a righteous life. A good place to see God's standard is in Exodus chapter 20, the Ten Commandments.

In our story of the two guards regiment candidates, one of the candidates is taller than the other. The taller of the two would have thought he was a shoo-in for the job if he were to compare himself to the shorter candidate. When he compared himself to the height standard, however, he realized he did not measure up. We have the tendency to do the same thing when it comes to living a righteous life. We compare ourselves to others, thinking we are better people

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than they are. However, when we compare ourselves to God's standard, we realize we fall short and are disqualified.

The taller of the two candidates also made an argument that his father was a guardsman. He went on to say that he had memorized drills and army regulations. Unfortunately, none of those things mattered, because he did not measure up to the standard. It is the same for us. It does not matter what our family has done or what religious activities we are doing. None of those things matter because we do not measure up to God's standard.

God gives us His holy standard in the Bible to show us that we all fall short. We need help. God sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross to pay the price for our sins. Jesus did not stay dead. He rose again! Only by trusting that Jesus' death on the cross paid the price for your sin, believing that He rose again, and making Him Lord of your life are we considered righteous in the eyes of God.

Because of this free gift God has given us, we all have the opportunity to measure up.

“For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” Romans 3:20

DEVOTION 3

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

JEANNIE YATES

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23

Death is horrendous. It is completely devastating. If you have lost someone close to you, then you know exactly what I mean. As I write this, news broke of another school shooting, and my heart sank. I cannot bear to even imagine the shock and loss these families now suddenly feel. No matter how or when death impacts your life, and it will, the result is gut-wrenching heartbreak. I hate to start this devotional on such a serious note, but this truly is a matter of life and death.

Romans 6:23 tells us, ***“The wages of sin is death.”*** Growing up in church, I have heard this verse a lot, and I am often tempted to try and soften the blow by changing the word death to a more palatable word like complicated, separation, eventual death, or simply bad. The thing is, this verse does not say, “The payment of sin is bad.” It says that it is ***“death!”*** I know some of you are thinking, “Come on, Jeannie, get to the second half of the verse!” However, let me challenge us to take a moment and think about what death really is. The cost of our sin is horrendous, completely devastating, gut-wrenching heartbreak. My husband, Josh, often says, “When we downplay the effects of our sin, we downplay the greatness of the cross of Christ.” Only when we recognize our desperate need for a Savior can we accept the amazing gift He brings. So, do not move on too quickly. Take a moment to acknowledge the cost of sin and the devastation it brings. Resist the urge to focus on someone else’s sin; rather, look at your own life and make it personal.

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The second half of the verse is the Good News, ***“But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*** Wow. This verse is so clear it really needs no explanation. God has offered you and me the antidote for death - true, lasting life! That is just how amazing the miracle of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross is - it brings dead things to life! Through Jesus, we have been gifted eternal life. The great thing about ***“eternal life”*** is that it is very different from just “future” life. Eternal life starts now. Jesus reminds us in John 10:10 that He ***“came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”***

So, now we have come to a crossroads. What are you going to do with this matter of life and death? Will you continue to pay the cost of sin or accept the free gift of life? Let me leave you with a challenge from Joshua 24:14-15, ***“Now therefore fear the Lord and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness. Put away the gods that your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord...choose this day whom you will serve...But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”***

DEVOTION 4

SACRIFICIAL LOVE

ALYSSA FAIRSE

“But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Romans 5:8

When I think of sacrificial love, the first and most powerful example that comes to mind is the love of Jesus Christ. On Calvary, He gave His life for us, offering the ultimate and free gift of salvation. Jesus, in His perfect love, chose to lay down His life, even for those who hated Him, and in doing so, He revealed the depth of God’s love for us. His sacrifice is not just an event in history; it is the very foundation of our faith and the model for how we are to live.

In light of Christ’s sacrifice, I often find myself asking, “How can I die to self?” Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow Him (Luke 9:23), to live not for ourselves but for the glory of God and the good of others. As I reflect on this call, I am reminded of the people in my life who embody this sacrificial love. One such person is my friend, Shawna. While she might not seek recognition and might even feel a bit uncomfortable being mentioned in this devotional, her life is a testament to the love of Christ. A couple of character traits jump out to me.

1. **Serving Beyond Comfort** – Although working with kids is not Shawna’s preferred ministry, she faithfully steps in each summer for River Kids Camp, serving, worshiping, and teaching children about Jesus. Through Christ, she willingly puts others’ needs above her own. In doing so, Shawna shows a steadfast commitment to loving others, no matter the circumstances. She leans into God’s calling, trusting that He will provide the strength she needs to persevere.

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2. **Joyful Service** – Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45). One morning, when chaos hit in the nursery, Shawna saw the need and immediately offered her help. Despite the demands of her own schedule, she chose to step in without hesitation, showing her willingness to serve wherever needed, just as Jesus served others without reservation.

In both situations, Shawna allowed Jesus to use her to demonstrate sacrificial love, not because it was easy, but because she understood the bigger picture: it was about glorifying Jesus and furthering His Kingdom. We may not be called to die physically for others like Jesus, but we are called to die to self daily, offering our lives in service for God's glory (Galatians 2:20). When we respond to needs, we become His hands and feet, and in doing so, we find joy and fulfillment in the very thing that reflects His love.

DEVOTION 5 SIMPLE TRUTH

RICH SAWICKI

“If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.”
Romans 10:9-10 (NIV)

Have you ever felt nervous about sharing your faith with someone? Maybe you have thought, “What if I say the wrong thing? What if they ask questions I cannot answer?” Those feelings are normal, but the good news is that God does not expect us to have all the answers. He just wants us to share what we know and trust Him with the rest.

Romans 10:9-10 shows us how simple salvation is; it is about believing in your heart and confessing with your mouth. That means when we share Jesus with others, we do not have to make it complicated. We just need to share the truth of who Jesus is and what He has done in our lives.

Think about it this way: If you find a really great restaurant or a product that makes your life easier, you naturally tell your friends about it. Sharing about Jesus is like that. You are sharing something amazing that has changed your life.

Start by sharing your story. People can argue about facts and opinions, but they cannot argue with your experience. What has Jesus done for you? How has He given you hope, peace, or purpose? Sharing from your heart is one of the most powerful ways to point others to Him.

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Another thing to remember is that God does not ask us to do this alone. The Holy Spirit is with us, guiding our words and working in the hearts of those we talk to. You might not see the results right away, and that is okay. It is not up to us to save people, that is God's job. Our job is to plant seeds by sharing the Gospel.

Sometimes, we overthink evangelism and feel like we have to be preaching on a stage. However, most of the time, it is as simple as having a conversation with a friend or showing kindness to a stranger. When people see the love of Jesus in us, they become curious about what makes us different.

If you are not sure where to start, ask God to open doors for you to share your faith. Pray for opportunities to talk about Jesus and for courage to take them. You might be surprised at how He works through you.

Sharing the Gospel is one of the most loving things we can do. Romans 10:9-10 reminds us that salvation is available to everyone who believes and confesses. Let us be bold in sharing that message, trusting that God will use our words and actions to draw others to Him.

DEVOTION 6

A CALL AND A PROMISE

CHRIS FREZZA

“For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’” Romans 10:13

“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

This is one of my favorite promises in Scripture for those who have not yet put their faith in Christ. These words represent an assurance that our God’s love knows no bounds and that His mission will not fail.

The Apostle Paul cites this verse from Joel 2:32. After describing a plea from the Lord for His people to return to Him after falling away into sin, He ends with a promise to pour out His Spirit on all flesh (Joel 2:28). After all the failures of the people of Israel, God showed His undying love for us by sending us His Spirit and making the promise to be there when we call out to Him.

What could be more encouraging for an unbeliever than to know that there is a God who promises to lend His ear to a heart crying out to Him? He will remember their sins no more (Hebrews 8:12). He is patient and ready to save the one who would call out to Him. This gives us great hope for the unbelievers in our lives. Think about a person who is in your circle of influence, whether at work, school, or otherwise, who does not know the Lord. Maybe they are even hostile to the things of God. It is important for us to never give up hope for their soul. God clearly has not given up hope for them. It is His mission to draw sinners unto Himself. Luke 19:10 says, ***“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”***

We know by the testimony of the Word of God that His promises never fail. I love the NASB version of Isaiah 55:11: ***“So will My***

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word be which goes out of My mouth; It will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the purpose for which I sent it.”

Keep praying for that unbelieving person you thought of. Keep showing the love of Christ to them. Keep serving them as Christ served us. Be open and willing to be obedient to the voice of the Holy Spirit in your heart when He prompts you to step into a critical moment with them. He wants you to be His voice in their life. God does not seek any special actions to become qualified to come to Him. He seeks the one who has a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17).

God is ready for the unbeliever to call out to Him. He is ready to prove His faithfulness yet again to the unbeliever in your life. That is the Reach focus we should all have as ambassadors in the world for the Kingdom of God – to share the hope we have with them, knowing that God will come through on His end. He will save the one who calls on Him.

The background of the entire page is a light-colored marbled paper with swirling, organic patterns in shades of white, light grey, and pale blue. The patterns resemble natural stone or liquid swirls.

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Lesson 2

Gather

DO NOT MISS IT

Pastor Ryan Story

The Church of Jesus Christ is not a building, but a vibrant community of believers who support, uplift, and encourage one another in their faith journey. A few years ago, God encouraged me by allowing my wife and I to get to know a woman who was getting involved inside The River Church at an amazing rate. She was serving, attending Growth Communities, and serving inside our prison ministries. It seemed as if when the doors were open; she was there. God has let me be a part of watching her grow. One day, in Growth Community, she said, “For years I knew about church, but I never knew what I was missing.” If “going to church” is the strongest sentiment in our hearts regarding the gathering, I feel that it is possible that we can miss out on the amazingness of what Christ wants His Church to be.

It is good to take a moment to refocus on the vision of The River Church, which is to Reach the lost, Gather with the saints, and Grow in God’s Word. If we stop long enough to look around, we see God moving Paul’s heart and pen to offer profound insights into the nature and blessings of being part of Christ’s Church. This study guide aims to explore various passages throughout the book to the Romans that emphasize the importance of gathering together as believers.

Mutually Encouraged

Romans 1:11-12 says, ***“For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you - that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine.”***

Right out the gate, in the notion of “did not know what we were missing,” we, so often, try to live our lives as separated and as individualized as we possibly can. When we live that way, it is possible that all of the beneficial aspects of gathering as a church can be lost. For a man as devoted to the Gospel as Paul was, for him to be encouraged because he was able to see people grow in

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their faith in Christ, Paul must have seen the heart behind Jesus' intentions for believers. We cannot do life alone. A follower of Christ is meant to be an encouragement and an encourager in other believers' walk with Jesus.

1. When was the last time you were mutually encouraged?

2. Why does sharing our faith with others in the church strengthen both people?

His Purpose, Your Good

Romans 8:28 adds, ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”***

I love the depth of Romans 8:28. It is an amazing truth to meditate on. While not everything we encounter in life is ***“good,”*** it does not mean that what we encounter has no meaning. Our God is an active God. He is always working even when we do not see it or understand why. The beautiful reality about God is He is working everything together for good. If God is the One working all things toward good, then that is a goodness I know I can rest in. The fun truth I came to realize is that God is the One working together to do everything for good, even in His church. While not all things are good, He is the One who has everyone there for a reason. The mind-blowing reality is that God worked out everything in order to have every person in your Growth Community tonight! So, there is a reason you are in a church with people who are not like you, who

think differently, and who respond differently. In the book *"Identity Theft"* the author wrote, "Unlike our self-chosen communities, the local church is a community of people God has chosen for us, for His glory and our good." Amazing how God works when we gather!

3. How does the assurance of God's plan working for our good encourage us in difficult times?

4. How can we, as a church community, support each other in trusting God's plan?

Gaps

The great theologian, Rocky Balboa, once talked about gaps. Basically, the idea is that one person has gaps and another person has gaps, but when those two people walk together, they have no gaps. In that notion of "I did not know what I was missing," so often we feel we have to have everything together; we have to be "gapless." However, the way that Jesus designed His Church was to be a team. It is a team of broken people who are full of gaps, but all redeemed, restored, and rescued because of Jesus' work on the cross. While we are all broken, Jesus brings us together to be one functioning body.

Romans 12:4-5 says, ***"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another."***

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5. What does it mean to you to be part of the ***“body in Christ”***?

6. How is the body of Christ meant to function?

7. How does gathering together help with unity?

Romans 12:6-8 continues, ***“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”***

8. How can we celebrate and encourage the diverse gifts within our church community?

All We Do Ought to Point to Jesus

Oftentimes, as a preacher, I feel I need to add to or explain God's Word. While reading the following verse, I felt as if God was telling me to quiet down. As a final encouragement to the church in Rome, God is moving Paul's pen as Paul writes, ***“May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one***

another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 15:5-6).

9. How can adopting the attitude of Christ toward one another strengthen our unity at The River Church?

10. How does unity and mutual encouragement within the church glorify God?

Many times, I fall into the trap and do not realize the beautiful gifts God has given. Sadly, I feel His Bride is one of them. Gathering is more than just going to church. Christ designed His church to be an active, living entity that helps people come to know Jesus and walk in new life with Him. Living in the “I did not realize what I was missing” is never fun, but for those of us who now know, let us gather purposely and passionately as we praise the One who is King.

NOTES

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DEVOTION 1

NO MATTER THE SEASON

CAMERON ALDRICH

A few weeks ago, I was visiting a woman from the church in the hospital. She had just been through a very difficult tragedy with her home. Based on the damage that happened and where she was when it happened, she was very fortunate to have not been in a worse condition. From the moment I entered her room, she was full of life, boldness, and thankfulness, and her words stuck with me throughout the day.

What struck me most was what she was focused on and what she chose to talk about during the visit. Here was someone who could have very easily focused only on the pain and loss that she faced from her situation. Yet, she was outwardly expressing God's truth and His plan for her in the midst of her tragedy. That visit gave me an awesome reminder of how powerful it is to share the truth of Christ, especially, in times of struggle.

In Romans 1:8, Paul writes, ***“First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.”*** This verse expresses Paul's deep gratitude for the believers in Rome whose faith was not only strong but, more importantly, public. The telling of their faith from Paul's perspective serves as a beautiful reminder that the Christian faith was never meant to be a quiet, private matter. Our faith is meant to be shared, and faith is a living testimony that speaks louder than words when shared openly.

Sometimes, life's difficulties may make us hesitant to speak about our faith. We might fear rejection, ridicule, or the discomfort of being vulnerable with others about our struggles. This is where our faith can shine the brightest. Even in adversity, our trust in God and the hope we find in Him can be such a powerful proclamation to those

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around us. When we share how God is sustaining us not only in perfection, but especially in our weakness, it invites others to see the hope we have in Christ. We should have confidence in proclaiming our faith since we know how much others need to hear about the light of Christ.

Proclaiming our faith does not mean we have to be evangelists on every street corner or always have the perfect answer in any circumstance. It means living out the love of Christ in real, tangible ways, whether it is in a simple conversation with a friend or coworker, or even in a brief interaction at the grocery store. Our actions speak volumes, and our words can offer light to those in darkness. We never know what others are going through, and in the instance when we have a short opportunity to converse with someone else, they could be facing immense difficulty or pain. Hearing the Good News could be so crucial for someone in their season.

If you happen to be walking through a hard season, take heart. God is able to use you, even in your weakness. Your faith, though tested, can be a testament to others about God's love and provision for His people. Whether it is through a quiet word of encouragement or a brave declaration of hope, your faith can be a light in the world, just as it was for the believers in Rome.

So, let us ask ourselves this question: How can we proclaim Christ, not just in good times, but in the hard moments, too? The world is watching, and your faith is a message of hope that will never return void.

DEVOTION 2

USING YOUR GIFTS

PASTOR CHUCK LINDSEY

“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.” Romans 12:6-8 (NKJV)

“We don’t go to church, we are the church” are words that I have heard often throughout the years. They are true words. They are meant to remind us of something that is often missed in our Western way of thinking about the Church: we need the Church and the Church needs us.

Many Christians see church attendance as just that, attendance. Many see church as going to some religious building, attending the service or gathering, listening to the music (if we get there in time for that!), listening to the message, getting what we can from what is offered, and then leaving as quickly as possible to get to lunch or whatever the day holds. What a small (and poor) view of the Church! The Church is so much more than just an endless rhythm of getting up on Sunday mornings with just enough time to hurry into the building, get what we can, and hurry back out.

“Church” is not the program. It is the people. It is not the music, the message, or the building. It is the people within that building (whatever building that may be). The “program” (often called a service or gathering) is just a word we use to describe some of the Church “members” (not talking about membership here) using their specific gifting to serve the rest of the Church members. The service or program is just one aspect of “Church.” The rest of

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“Church” occurs before, during, and after the program. When you arrive and interact with others, using your gifting to impact people, you are being the Church. When you stay afterward to interact and engage with others, asking God to use you to encourage others, you are being the Church. When we engage in conversation and care for others, using the gifts we read about here in Romans to encourage and minister to others, we are contributing to the Church in very significant ways! As an example, your hug may mean more to the person who has felt unseen and unimportant all week than the sermon will that day. Your prayer for someone going through difficulty might have more impact than the music will that morning.

Do you have the gifting to teach? Use it to help others see the right way to go or the biblical way to think about something. Do you have the gift of feeling what others feel? Use it to encourage those who are hurting or to celebrate with those who are rejoicing. Do you have the gift to help counsel and comfort? Use it to encourage the discouraged. Have you been blessed with resources to give? Give to meet the needs of others. Are you a leader? Come into the Church and lead others in the things of the Lord. We could go on and on, but the point is we must see ourselves as a part of what makes “the Church” the Church. We must come, not only to receive but to give. It is to give of ourselves to the help and benefit of others. Practically speaking, this means that we need to get up early enough to get there early enough for God to use us. This may mean we need to go to bed sooner on Saturday nights. This means that we do not rush out of church as soon as the program is done; rather, we choose to stay for a bit and let the Lord use us in the lives of others. This means that before we leave the house, we ask God to use us today to bless, help, and encourage others. We need to give rather than simply receive.

DEVOTION 3

HEAVENLY COMPLIMENT

JASMYN BICKNELL

“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.”

Romans 12:11

Before I dive in, I want to define a couple of words in this verse. A quick Google search tells us that **“zeal”** means “great energy or enthusiasm in pursuit of a cause or an object,” and that **“fervent”** means “having or displaying a passionate intensity.”

I am not the biggest fan of words of affirmation. In fact, when someone compliments me, I usually get awkward and do not quite know how to respond. Thinking over this verse, though, I imagined what it would be like to stand in front of the Lord one day, entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Will He look at what I did here on Earth and say, “You served me with zeal and a fervent spirit,” or will He ask, “Why didn’t you do more?” I sure hope it is the former; the joy I would feel knowing that my Heavenly Father is proud of me would compare to nothing else. That is the only compliment that I genuinely hope I will receive and the only one I strive for.

Something that has been weighing on my heart recently is the knowledge that I will not be in the position or place that I am in forever. I keep thinking, “Do the best you can in the place you are in.” I have a habit of looking at what is next. Rather than being in the moment and enjoying what is happening now, I anticipate what is to come. Obviously, there is wisdom in preparation and planning, but if the only thing you are doing is planning for the future, you do not have time to stop and appreciate what the Lord has given you now.

If I am to be remembered in generations to come, I so deeply hope it is not for anything that I specifically did but for how I did it, fervently

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and with great zeal for the Lord. I pray that is my influence on others and I can encourage them to have a fervent desire to serve the Lord. I hope this is how people see my service to the Lord, not cutting corners because I am lazy and want to get it done to check off a box.

So, while I have this position, my prayer will be: "Lord, help me to be prepared for what You have in store for the future. Show me the opportunities that I have right in front of me while I wait for the next door to open. Help me to serve You with passion and enthusiasm, knowing my reward will be in Heaven."

DEVOTION 4

BE AN ANSWER TO PRAYER

PASTOR JOSHUA YATES

“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.” Romans 14:1-4

“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves.” Romans 15:1

Does anyone have issues that they deal with in their life? I imagine you have your hand raised up along with me.

I have always struggled with my weight. I do not have time to go into all of the details here, but my father weighed 800 pounds and died when I was in high school. I have gained and lost weight all of my life. It is something that I am still working through.

Around fifteen years ago, I had someone come to me when I was a youth pastor and tell me that I should never tuck in my shirts because when I was on stage leading worship it looked really bad. I have never tucked in a shirt since.

I share that with you today because so often we look at people that are struggling with something and we instantly judge them. We look down upon them because their thing is not our thing. We think it is an easy thing to overcome and that the other person should just

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have it figured out. I cannot tell you how many times people have told me to “just eat less.” Wow! That is life-changing! I have never thought about that (sarcasm added)!

There is not a person that is reading this devotion today that has everything figured out. Every single one of us has a weakness that we need help with. Maybe it is financial, relational, or physical. It could be anything like addiction, to telling lies to look better, to stealing, or to so many other vices.

Paul is reminding us today to love each other well. He has already told us that we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory. He has talked about the wages of our sin and that we all need a Savior. He has even proclaimed that he was the chief of sinners: the things he knew he should do, he did not do, and the things he knew he should not do, he found himself doing! Paul needed a Savior, too!

No matter your strengths or weaknesses, you, too, need a Savior. When you come across someone with weakness in their life, be reminded that you have weaknesses, too. Remember how you may have been saved from those weaknesses. Remember what Jesus has done for you and come alongside those with weaknesses. So much of what we see is actually not what a person is really struggling with but a symptom of something much deeper. Looking down on someone's symptoms will not allow them to get the help that is, oftentimes, desperately needed.

Besides, if another person's weakness is a strength in your life, you may just be the answer to a lifelong prayer for strength and help. Take the opportunity to be God's answer to another's prayer and be God's blessing.

DEVOTION 5

HARMONY OF HOPE: UNITED IN PRAISE

DAVID HUDGENS

I have always thought that it would be cool to experience a flash mob. Picture this: you are sitting in a sunlit courtyard with your favorite beverage when a lone figure stands and begins to sing. Gradually, others join in, forming a spontaneous chorus that envelops the spectators in a beautiful tapestry of melody. What begins as a single note transforms into a powerful anthem. In that moment, individual voices are amplified, creating a harmonious tribute to something greater than themselves.

This image resonates deeply with Romans 15:8-13, where Paul reveals the profound truth of God's mercy, now available to everyone, meaning Jew and Gentile alike. He writes, ***“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, ‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name.’ And again it is said, ‘Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people.’ And again, ‘Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples extol him.’ And again Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.’ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope.”***

In this passage, Paul emphasizes that God's mercy extends beyond cultural boundaries, breaking down the walls between Jews and Gentiles. Now, we are all invited to worship together, celebrating the same grace that unites us. The church, a mosaic of diverse backgrounds and experiences, is called to lift our voices in unified praise to the God who shows mercy to all.

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Just as the flash mob creates a stunning harmony, our collective worship (whether in song, prayer, or deed) becomes something greater when we unite. Each person brings their unique story and gifts, contributing to a magnificent chorus that magnifies the hope and joy found in Christ. When we gather as the body of Christ, our voices rise not just as individuals, but as a testament to the hope that binds us together.

This week, I encourage you to reflect on your participation in the Sunday gathering. Are you actively engaging or holding back? Is your heart focused on the collective praise of God, or are you merely going through the motions?

If you feel disconnected, remember that your voice matters in this larger chorus. Whether through music, prayer, or service, your participation contributes to the collective praise that reflects God's glory. Let your worship transcend a Sunday morning routine. May your mouth, heart, and mind embody the hope, peace, joy, and love you have discovered in Christ.

DEVOTION 6

FINANCIAL GIVING

PASTOR JOHN CARTER

There is a common narrative about the church that some people repeat, “All the church ever wants is your money.” While there may be some truth to this sentiment, it is important to recognize that not all churches or ministries are guilty of this. The issue often arises when individuals ask you to send in \$100 for “healing water” or a “magic prayer” that promises to make everything better. If things do not improve, the response is often, “You just lacked faith.” Anyone peddling this kind of narrative is most definitely after your money.

In response to these money-hungry peddlers of untruth, many people react with the opposite extreme, “We will not give.” While this may not be everyone’s reaction, if you have been scammed in the past, it is understandable that you might feel defensive about the subject of giving. However, the instructions to give are clear in Scripture. It is not a mystery that requires a doctorate or a master’s degree in theology to understand how God desires His people to respond in giving.

The instructions to give were established as early as when God instructed His people through Moses. It was clearly outlined in the Law of God that a person should pay close attention to their heart and attitude toward giving. You can read this for yourself in Deuteronomy 15:7–9.

The summary is this: Do not harden your heart against your fellow brother or sister in need. Just as God has given freely to you, you should also give freely to the poor and needy in your towns, cities, and land. If you harbor an evil or unworthy thought against your brother or sister and choose to take a grudging stance by withholding from them, you will be sinning against God.

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This is where the instructions for giving to the poor might have originated, and it has been lived out throughout the centuries by those who have had faith in Christ. From the Old Testament saints to the modern church, the message of how we are called to care for one another is clearly articulated in Scripture.

In Acts 20:35, it is recorded that Jesus Himself said, ***“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”*** This is why we see, in the early church writings of Paul, the very actions the church took in response to giving. Romans 15:25–26 says, ***“At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem, bringing aid to the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.”***

It was obvious to the early church what the proper response to giving should be. We have received such great blessings from God - most notably the free gift of salvation - that when we see a brother or sister in need, we should help without hesitation.

The heart with which we approach giving can reflect the heart of Christ. Just as Christ willingly gave His own life, knowing the sacrifice it would cost Him, He gave intentionally - for you and for me, individuals who are spiritually poor. He gave richly so that we could be saved. Imagine if we all gave the way Christ gave! Examining our hearts' attitude toward giving should lead us to reflect on the heart of Christ.

The background of the entire page is a light-colored marbled paper with swirling, organic patterns in shades of grey, white, and pale yellow.

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Lesson 3

Grow

GROW IN THE LORD

Pastor Noble Baird

It does not matter how old or young you are, where you work, where you live, how big or small your family is; regardless of all these different scenarios, growing is a part of every facet of life. Every day we wake up, we grow another day older. Every day spent with your parents, spouse, children, or friends is another day growing closer to them and knowing them better.

1. When you hear the word “grow,” what comes to mind?

2. Does it make you feel anxious and daunted or excited and happy?

For years, weightlifting and working out has been a huge part of my life. For the majority of my life, I was overweight, so that always plays a mental factor. However, it has become not simply a routine but an essential part of my life. Throughout this journey of weight loss and what eventually became physical growth, it has been one step at a time. Weight loss and strength do not happen overnight, although I truly wish they did! Every day, I have had to make the decision to show up and put in the work and time, and I have seen growth. Again, this did not happen all at once, nor was it always measurable. Yet, every time I lift or run, growth happens.

3. What is something that you have actively worked on growing in your life?

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4. What are some of the challenges or roadblocks you have hit?

In Romans 8:26-28, Paul writes, ***“Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*** Paul shares one of the three key ingredients to spiritual growth. In this passage, Paul focuses on the work of the Spirit. We know that as Jesus said in John 16:4-15, He was going to leave this Earth. However, He was not going to leave us, His followers who confess and believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior; He was going to send a Helper, the Holy Spirit. Then, in Acts chapter 2, we see the glorious indwelling of the Spirit upon the disciples in the upper room. From there, we see the indwelling of the Spirit in the lives of all who believe and confess Jesus as Savior! Paul talks about how the Spirit works in us to intercede, guide, and strengthen us.

5. When you read John 16:4-15, what does it mean to have the Spirit in each of us as followers of Christ?

6. Have you ever had a time in your life when you felt the Spirit leading you? What was that like? Were you obedient?

Paul also mentions another key ingredient to spiritual growth: prayer. The incredible thing about the work of the Spirit in our lives is that even when we do not know how to pray, He does, and He intercedes on our behalf to God the Father. Paul reminds us in 1 Thessalonians 5:17 that we are to pray without ceasing. What this means is that we are constantly listening to the Lord, the Spirit's leading in our lives and that we are prioritizing Christ in all we do. This does not mean that we have to be 24/7 in prayer to God, as that would be impossible, but it is the act of continually and consciously thinking of and prioritizing Him in all aspects of our lives.

7. When was the last time you spent time praying?

8. Take time now to just pause, either individually or as a group, to pray, and, as Philippians 4:4-6 tells us, let God know what is going on in your heart and life.

Finally, in Romans 8:28, Paul writes, ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*** If you get nothing else from all this, understand this truth. For us as followers of Jesus Christ, those who have confessed and believed in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, know that the Lord is always working for our good according to His perfect will. One of the hardest parts of growth is when things do not go according to plan. There have been many times during my fitness journey that I have had setbacks like tendinitis, broken toes, stitches in my hands, sickness, and the dreaded shoulder injury - if you know, you know! Yet, through all these setbacks, I have learned to adapt. I learned which lifts and movements not to do. I also learned how to overcome.

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In the same way, during our walk with the Lord, we will have setbacks. Our priorities may shift a little. We will neglect the importance of prayer and reading God's Word, or we may even ignore the Spirit's leading. However, it is the moments that we admit and observe our neglect in our walks with the Lord that we can learn and experience another opportunity for growth. Remember, true growth takes time, hard work, and sometimes hard lessons, but it will always produce the greatest results. For our spiritual growth, if we are truly working daily to grow nearer to Him through prayer, reading God's Word, and obedience to the Spirit's leading, we will get to experience His will for our lives unfold in ways we never expected.

9. What do you need to do to refocus and realign your life to the Lord's growth plan for you?

10. How will you grow in the Lord today, this week, and this month?

NOTES

DEVOTION 1

FEAR, FAITH, AND SPACE MOUNTAIN

SIERRA COMBS

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Romans 1:16-17

There is a moment in my life that sticks with me, like a scene from a movie. It was the 90s at Disneyland, and I was a little kid with my Winnie the Pooh backpack set so stylishly on my back. My parents had sent me with family friends visiting from out of state, naming me their official Disneyland tour guide. Growing up in Southern California, I knew that park better than my own bedroom. However, there was one big problem - I hated roller coasters. Chip and Dale's Toontown coaster was about as daring as I would go, but Space Mountain? Not a chance. My parents never pushed me, so we always skipped it. That day, however, my friend's parents decided they were going on Space Mountain, and I was coming with them. I was terrified. I sobbed in line for what felt like an eternity, my arguments falling flat. When we finally reached the front, my friend's mom looked me square in the eye and said, "Sierra, I know you are scared, but I also know you are going to love this. Do you trust me?" Now, for the purpose of this example, I wish I could say that my answer was "Yes! I absolutely trust you! Let's do this!" In reality, I told her that no, I did not trust her, and that she was really mean, all while choking back sobs. Even though I was forced onto that ride, she was right. I loved it. We rode it again, and that day changed me. I went from fearing roller coasters to chasing them. I just needed someone to push me to step out in faith, trusting there was something good on the other side.

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When I think about faith in God, I think about that moment. Faith so often requires us to step into places where we cannot see the outcome, trusting that God is leading us toward something good. Romans 1:16-17 reminds us that faith is at the core of our righteousness. Paul boldly proclaims that he is ***“not ashamed of the gospel”*** because it is the very power of God to save those who believe. This kind of faith does not always come easily. Like a little kid clinging to fear in a roller coaster line, we often resist stepping where God calls us. Why? It is because our human nature craves control. We want certainty and comfort. Living by faith means surrendering those desires and trusting God instead.

Romans 2:13 tells us that it is not enough to hear God's Word - we have to live it. Faith without action is incomplete. Real faith leads us to obedience. It changes how we live, how we love, and how we trust. For me, this means trusting God with everything, from the big things in my life all the way down to the tiny details. It is my daily choice to lean on Him when I feel overwhelmed with my schedule or believe that He will provide when finances are tight. It is saying yes to others even when I feel stretched too thin or recognizing that I am a sinner who just keeps messing up. Living by faith means refusing to rely on my own strength and instead choosing to rely on His promises, even when my emotions tell me otherwise.

Faith is not about having everything figured out; it is about trusting the One who does. Here is the beauty of it: when we live by faith, we find freedom. We do not have to be perfect or prove ourselves to God. He simply calls us to trust Him and let that trust shape how we live. So today, I challenge you: where is God asking you to step out in faith? Maybe it is a big leap or just a small step. Wherever it is, do not let fear keep you from experiencing the good He has for you. Trust Him! He sees the whole picture, even when you do not.

DEVOTION 2 HUMILITY BRINGS HARMONY

PASTOR JOSH COMBS

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.” Romans 12:3

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.” Romans 12:16

Apparently, the Apostle Paul had some concerns for the Christians in Rome. Conflict between different classes of people, snooty attitudes, and a dangerous combination of arrogance and ignorance concerning talents all seemed to be coalescing to create major issues in the church. Harmony was not happening. Everyone seemed to be on their own page and doing their own thing.

In an orchestra, a conductor needs each musician to properly see themselves, their instruments, and their particular part to be able to make beautiful music. The same is true in a choir. Each singer must understand their assignment and accept their vocal abilities and limits. If one singer or group of singers fails to do either of these, the choir's overall ability is stifled. Harmony is impossible as an individual voice. However, with others who know their part and sing their part, beautiful music can be created. When we recognize our spot in the orchestra, in the choir, on the team, or in the church, harmony happens. There are always going to be people less gifted, more gifted, and differently gifted by God.

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Humility is seeing both our gifts and our limitations clearly. Sometimes we mistakenly identify humility as simply seeing our weaknesses and inabilities. This often leads to immense insecurity, which is just another form of pride. We remain self-focused and self-reliant, and what perpetuates that cycle is self-doubt.

Twice in verse 3, Paul points out that God has given and ***“God has assigned.”*** Each of our abilities and talents comes from God. We may work to refine those abilities, but the fundamental capacity to learn and grasp a skill is a gift from God. The key is knowing it is a gift.

Human harmony is achieved when we abide by the ancient proverb “know thyself.” We each see what we are good at, what we are bad at, accept it, and harmonize. I am bad at this and you are good at that. We complement each other and make a great team. True humility is seeing how greatly God has gifted each of us.

This is Christ's vision for His church - know your gifts and then use your gifts to harmonize with people across the socio-economic scale to the glory of God and furtherance of His Gospel.

DEVOTION 3

REJOICE IN SUFFERING

ELIJAH EDWARDS

I am going to get right to the point with our topic today: we need to rejoice in suffering. Right off the bat, many of us would be thinking that rejoicing when we are suffering is one of the most backwards things we have ever heard. How can anyone feel any joy in suffering? That seems impossible and just plain idiotic to even propose that. That thought process is exactly what the world would say to this phrase, but what does God say about it?

Romans 5:3-5 (ESVUK) says, ***“More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”***

1. What does it mean that ***“suffering produces endurance”***?
How would it produce ***“endurance”***?

In a world full of sin, suffering and heartbreak are bound to happen to all of us. Some are more severe, some more frequent, some mental, some physical, but the point is that it is inevitable. Yet, when faced with that inevitability, what do we go to?

2. In full honesty, how often do you go to things that will make you happy in the moment when faced with turmoil rather than turn to Jesus?

When we ***“rejoice in our sufferings,”*** we are not just bottling up our emotions or feelings toward what is happening. We are meant to mourn, we can lament, and we can feel sorrow or loss, but the

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idea of rejoicing is praising the God who is always with you in the midst of the suffering. We rejoice because we have a relationship with Jesus, the One who took the punishment we deserved because of our sins and saved us from ourselves. He is the One that brings us true joy, and He is the One that we are able to go to when we endure suffering.

3. Knowing this, how do you approach ***“rejoice in our sufferings”*** differently?

Suffering will happen. Sin is very real, and the world is broken because of our actions. Yet, God is so good that even in the midst of it, He still came to save us. We can rejoice in that no matter what is happening around us.

DEVOTION 4

GROWING IN THE LORD

CHRIS MONTVILLE

Do you ever look back on your life and wonder why you were the way that you were? I often have this experience when I look back at my childhood and the decisions I made. I have a lot of regrets based on actions I took and things I said that I wish I could take back. However, I recognize that having the ability to look back and see mistakes I have made is a sign of growth. It is growth to realize what you did, see the problem with it, and make efforts not to make those same mistakes. That is called changing. This happens not only in situations in life but also in our walk with Christ.

Romans 12:2 says, ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”***

As we grow in our relationship with the Lord, we should be in a state of continuously being ***“transformed”*** by the renewal of our minds, which will help us discern the will of God in our lives. This process is called sanctification. It is the process in which Christians grow to be more and more like Christ. The tricky part of this process is that it looks different for every Christian, and there is not a one-size-fits-all list of tasks to complete in order to achieve this growth.

I was saved while I was in college at GVSU, and I got plugged in with a student organization called Cru (Campus Crusade for Christ). I met a friend there who was further along in his faith walk than me, and he really helped disciple me as a new believer. I mentioned to him just the other day how I now recognize how many stupid things I said as a new believer, even things that were flat-out wrong. However, I just did not know any better! I remember him offering his correction in those moments, and I disagreed with it at the time.

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Looking back, I recognize how wrong I was on so many things. It takes time to grow in your faith. However, that growth will not happen without intentionality. I could have said the things that I said and never opened my Bible, received counsel, or asked questions, and I would probably still believe those things! It is only in seeking His Word and walking in community that we grow. As we grow, we continue to discern the will of God more clearly in our lives.

If you are in a spot where you feel like you have not grown in a while, my challenge to you would be to consider what you have not been doing lately. Have you been in the Word consistently and intentionally? Do you have a mentor in your life? Are you asking questions? Growth is available to those who seek it, and the Bible is clear that we should be continuously pursuing growth towards the Lord. I challenge you to think about what your next step toward Him could be today.

DEVOTION 5

LABORING LOVE

GRANT GRIMES

“Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Romans 12:12

Many Christians face three key challenges in their spiritual walk: delighting in waiting on God’s plan, being patient and calm amidst the world’s brokenness, and maintaining persistence in prayer. These are not easy tasks, but they are central to the life of a believer. In Romans chapter 12, Paul begins with a call to genuine love. This is where we must start because genuine love is the very essence of who Christ is (1 John 4:7-9). Christ is love, and our devotion to Him is rooted in the desire to become more like Him. Our journey is about being conformed to His image (Romans 8:29), and at the heart of this transformation are the questions: How can we grow to be more like our Savior? How can we embody His love?

Pastor Kent Hughes describes living for Christ as “laboring love.” It is a love that is not passive but requires effort, commitment, and hard work. Acting like Christ is not for the faint of heart. It demands a willingness to put others before ourselves, to persevere in kindness, and to be patient in times of trial. However, there is one key practice that fuels all of this: prayer. In this passage, Paul highlights three essential characteristics of Christ, or fruit of the Spirit: joy, patience, and faithfulness. These are foundational to the Christian life, but they can be incredibly difficult to embody, especially in times of distress or hopelessness. How do we remain joyful? How do we stay patient? How do we persevere in faithfulness? The answer is found in persistent, ongoing prayer.

In Luke 22:42-44, we see Christ exemplifying joy, patience, and faithfulness, even as He prepares to commit the greatest act of love

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the world would ever know. Jesus, in His moment of deepest anguish, goes before the Father in prayer. In the garden of Gethsemane, He prays, ***“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done”*** (Luke 22:42). Here, Christ demonstrates not only submission to God’s will but a deep, intimate relationship with the Father. He delights in His connection with God, waits on God’s timing, and, in His anguish, prays persistently. Jesus prays multiple times, modeling for us the power of prayer in moments of suffering.

This passage teaches us that true love is not passive. It is active, intense, and driven. Christ’s love for the world was a labor of prayer, obedience, and sacrifice. If we are to live out this kind of love, we must labor in prayer as well. Prayer is where we find our strength to be joyful, patient, and faithful. Prayer aligns our hearts with God’s will and sustains us through life’s trials. It is in our times of prayer that we become more like Christ and reflect His love to others.

DEVOTION 6

LIVING IN PEACE WITH OTHERS

DEBBIE GABBARA

“May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus.” Romans 15:5 (NLT)

As I write this, it is the Christmas season. I love being up at night, sitting in the light of the Christmas tree. Late, in the quiet of the night, is when I very often hear the Lord and contemplate the things He is teaching me. Some lessons are harder to learn than others, especially when they include challenging relationships.

The Lord Himself is our source of patience and encouragement. In the first 30 years of His life, Jesus became equipped for a powerful ministry that would have an eternal impact. In Luke chapter 2, we read that Jesus, who was fully God and fully man, grew in wisdom and stature. All through the Gospels, we see that He spent much time in prayer and was strengthened and encouraged by the Father. Jesus responded with love to all the people as they were constantly asking so much of Him. He was patient with the disciples, who often seemed to lack faith and were slow to understand His mission. Like the disciples, I know that I am sometimes really slow in hearing what the Lord is saying.

Throughout His life here on Earth, Jesus was the example to us of how to live in harmony with those who oppose the truth and test us in so many different ways. It takes patience and love for us not to respond in a fleshly manner to those who have views and ideas that differ from ours.

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Perseverance is commanded of us and given to us by God. If we know Jesus, we have the blessing of the Holy Spirit living in us. He grants us access to divine patience, encouragement, and strength from the Lord. It is through Christ alone that we are able to bear fruit and battle the flesh that threatens to steal the harmony and peace we have in our relationships with others.

Romans 12:18 (NLT) says, ***“Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.”***

Christ was our example of patience and living in harmony with others. As we seek Him in prayer, God will faithfully lead us in His ways. In this, He will help us conform to His image and live peaceably and harmoniously with those around us.

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Lesson 4

Romans 9:1-29

YOUR WORD IS YOUR PROMISE

Pastor Philip Piasecki

When dealing with kids, you have to be careful with every single word that you speak. Whether it is your own kids, a niece, nephew, grandchild, or just a kid at kids' church, when they hear you say you are going to do something for them, that is a promise. My son started saying out of nowhere, "You said you would do that, and your word is your promise." It was in response to whether I ever tried to go back on anything I said. Mind you, most of the time, I never actually promised it, but that is an argument that we are not going to win with him. Many people look at God like this. They see promises that He makes throughout Scripture and (incorrectly) believe they have found Him breaking those promises. We see some of these promises come into question in Romans chapter 9 regarding the Israelites being the chosen people of God.

Romans 9:1-8 says, ***"I am speaking the truth in Christ - I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit - that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but 'Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.' This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."***

The hard reality here in Romans chapter 9 is that many of God's chosen people, the Israelites, rejected Jesus. This truth brings great sorrow to Paul. These are his ***"kinsmen."*** He continually sees them refuse to accept the message of Jesus Christ that he is presenting

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to them. He is so heartbroken that he even expresses that he would be willing to cut himself off from Christ so that they could be saved. Even though Paul knows that it is spiritually impossible, his sorrow is so great that he wishes that it would be possible.

1. What is your reaction to reading Paul say that he wishes he could be **“accursed”** and **“cut off”** from Christ for the sake of his Israelite brothers?

2. Do you have that same type of sorrow for those that are lost? Do you think we should feel that way toward unbelievers?

Paul goes on to list all of the different things that belonged to the Israelites due to being God’s chosen people. The list is really quite amazing, and we could spend a whole lesson studying everything Paul lists here. However, despite having full access to all the amazing promises of God, many of the Israelites still chose their own way instead.

3. What thoughts come to mind when reading that list of things that belonged to the Israelites while knowing that they still rejected Jesus?

Sometimes, we look at the Israelites in disgust, wondering how they could have possibly rejected Jesus when they were God’s chosen people. The Lord had done so much for them and been so patient

with them, yet they still did not believe. However, we can clearly see examples from our own lives in their rejection. I know there have been times when I have clearly seen the Lord move and work, yet I still did not trust Him.

4. Do you find similarities in your life and the history of the Israelites?

As Paul is thinking through how so many Israelites rejected Jesus, he acknowledges the question that He knew we would all be asking, “If the Israelites were God’s chosen people, yet many did not believe, does that mean the Word of God has failed?” We see explained in the verses that follow that those who truly belong to Israel are those who accepted Christ, not those who were just born into it. This affirms the teaching all throughout Scripture that salvation is not by works but by faith alone. God’s Word did not fail. His promise is being fulfilled in the spiritual descendants of Abraham through their salvation.

Romans 3:28 says, ***“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”***

5. Do you feel like God’s plan failed with the Israelites? Do you ever feel like God’s plan has failed in your life or this world? Why or why not?

Romans 9:14-18 says, ***“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on***

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whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”

Following this section of Scripture, inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul writes one of the most difficult passages of Scripture that I believe there is. While reading it, I believe it brings up endless questions in our minds:

- Is God just?
- Is God fair?
- Is God righteous?

We would be asking the same question that Paul asks here.

- How is it fair when someone hardens their heart towards the Lord, and the Lord uses that for His glory?
- How is it fair that many of His “chosen people” rejected the promise?

6. Do you ever feel like God is not fair? What are some situations in your life or this world that make you feel that way?

God’s righteousness is demonstrated in how His actions always perfectly align with His attributes and what is right. He is perfectly just, holy, and fair in all His actions and decisions. Everything He does is in accordance with His sovereign plan for all creation. These verses show us that God is ultimately in full control. In terms of salvation, we have to live in the tension of understanding that God

is working out His plan through all of us. Paul states this in verse 15, ***“I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.”*** He says this while also holding us personally responsible for how we respond to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In reference to this section of Scripture, the Expositor’s Bible Commentary puts it this way, “Those who are saved are saved only by the mercy of God; those who are lost are lost only because of their refusal to repent.”

7. How does understanding God’s sovereignty and mercy in salvation, as described in Romans 9:15, help us balance trusting His plan while taking responsibility for our response to the Gospel?

In 2 Peter 3:9, we read, ***“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.”***

God’s righteousness is shown by His patience towards us, that He does not wish that any should perish, and all would reach repentance. We see this example in His continued patience towards Israel throughout the Old Testament, and I believe we can see examples of this in our own lives. I am so thankful the Lord has been patient with me through the times that I reject Him. All throughout that time, He desired that I would reach repentance.

8. How have you felt God’s patience toward you in your life?

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Romans 9:19-20 adds, ***“You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’”***

I have always thought that I am glad I believe in a God that I cannot understand everything about because if, in my finite mind, I could fully understand Him, then how great would He really be? This verse reiterates that God is the potter and we are the clay, and the clay needs to trust the potter to do what He sees fit. The passage says, ***“Who are you, O man, to answer back to God?”*** This is not to say that we cannot ask questions to the Lord. The Lord gladly welcomes our questions; it is saying when God does give us answers to our questions, we should trust Him.

9. How does the analogy of the potter and the clay help you trust God’s plans, even when you do not understand them fully? Can you share a time when you struggled to understand God’s actions but later saw His plan at work?

Isaiah 55:8-9 says, ***“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”***

10. Do these verses in Isaiah encourage you in your trust of the Lord or discourage you? How so?

Titus 2:13 states, ***“Waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”***

God desired a ***“people for his own possession”*** so dearly that He sent His son Jesus to die on the cross so that we could be redeemed and purified. Ultimately, God's plan is in motion, and He will use humanity in whichever way He sees fit to accomplish His purposes. God can be glorified through those that oppose Him and those that trust Him. In my own life, my prayer is that the Lord allows me to be used by Him as a vessel of mercy to accomplish His plan. This plan was started with the Israelites and continues through us today when we accept Him as the Savior of our lives. We can trust that His ways are righteous and that everything He does is to fulfill His promises and purposes. His word is His promise.

NOTES

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DEVOTION 1 UNCEASING ANGUISH

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

“I am speaking the truth in Christ - I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit - that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” Romans 9:1-3

Paul was Jewish. He took great pride in his heritage. Philippians 3:4-6 records, ***“Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.”*** Paul was not only Jewish, he calls himself ***“a Hebrew of Hebrews.”*** When Paul had his encounter with the Lord (Acts 9), he realized and accepted that Jesus was the promised Messiah. He became a follower of Jesus, wanting to lead others to Him. Paul became passionate that his family, friends, and countrymen would accept what he had found in Jesus. Romans 9:2 says, ***“That I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.”*** Paul's heart burned for their salvation.

How much do you hurt for those who do not know the Lord? Do you have any family members, relatives, friends, neighbors, classmates, or co-workers who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior? Do you pray for them daily? Do your prayers include any emotion like ***“great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart”***?

Our prayers need to include our emotions. There should be excitement and joy in adoring the Lord and expressing our

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thankfulness to Him. However, there should also be heartfelt pain in confessing our sins and coming to the Lord in our requests for others and ourselves. Praying for the salvation of others should be specific, often, and passionate.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, “If sinners be damned, at least let them leap to Hell over our dead bodies. And if they perish, let them perish with our arms wrapped about their knees, imploring them to stay. If Hell must be filled, let it be filled in the teeth of our exertions, and let not one go unwarned and unprayed for.”

Who has the Lord placed on your heart?

Jon, a student in The River Church Pastors Academy, reminded the class, “How much must you hate someone not to share the Gospel with them?” That question haunts me in a good way. I am striving to be more desperate in my daily conversations with the Lord over the salvation of loved ones. Then, I pray for what my next step should be in reaching out to them.

Who has the Lord placed on your heart? Pray!

DEVOTION 2

CHILDREN OF THE PROMISE

PASTOR JOSH COMBS

“But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.’ This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”

Romans 9:6-8

The Jewish leaders in the Lord Jesus’s time, and then later during the Apostle Paul’s time, believed that their biological connection to Abraham was a guarantee that they belonged to God. They believed, it seems, without any doubt, that because of their genealogy, they would be welcomed into Heaven.

Their ancestor, Israel (Jacob), had inherited the covenant promises from his father, Isaac, who had been given the covenant by his father, Abraham, who had covenanted with God. Paul said, ***“And not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but ‘Through Isaac shall your offspring be named’”*** (Romans 9:7). Are they from, but not belonging? Are they children that are not offspring? Something deeper than genealogy is being spoken of. That is why I love the phrase ***“this means.”***

Romans 9:8 says, ***“This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring.”***

“This means” being an heir of Abraham, and, more specifically, a member of the covenant family of God, was more than just genetics, rule-following, or circumcision. The covenant was not about a human

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bloodline but about faith in God's promise. More than hair color, eye color, or any other genetic similarities were being passed down the line.

In the Gospel of John, the religious elites argue against Jesus by saying, ***“Abraham is our father”*** (John 8:39). Jesus' response must have shocked and confused them. Jesus says, ***“If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did.”***

Like these religious leaders, we can also rely on things other than the promise of the Gospel as our confidence in eternal life. Sometimes, people place their confidence in family connections, church membership, good deeds, a feeling of innate moral goodness, or baptism.

Faith in the promise is what makes somebody a true spiritual descendant of Abraham and, therefore, a child of God. To the Galatians, Paul wrote, ***“Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the scripture foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham saying, ‘In you shall all the nations be blessed.’ So then, those of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith”*** (Galatians 3:7-9).

In Abraham's case, it was faith in a Savior that was to come, and in our case, it is faith in a Savior that has come. That faith in Jesus' death and resurrection, His redemptive and reconciling work, brings us into the covenant. We are no longer orphans or strangers, but sons and daughters, the ***“children of the promise.”***

DEVOTION 3 **IS GOD A MONSTER?**

PASTOR JAYSON COMBS

“What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means!” Romans 9:14

Is God a monster? That is an odd question to start a devotion. Romans chapter 9 deals with some very difficult subjects. Our finite minds can truly struggle to grasp the infinite ways of God. In the middle of this difficult teaching, Paul asks a question, “Is God unfair?” Kent Hughes makes a valuable observation, “At first, it appears that Paul does not really answer the question but simply says it is impossible for God to do anything unjust, but the answer is sufficient.” It is like Paul sees our struggle to understand these truths, and he stops and says, “The way you will find peace in all of this is to go back to the foundation of who God is.” In that, you will find peace even in the difficult truths. A.W. Tozer, in his book *“Knowledge of the Holy”* (a great book to read on the attributes of God), wrote, “What comes to mind when we think about God is the most important thing about us.”

Today, I would like you to focus on the characters and attributes of God. To do this, flip your Bible open to Psalm 103. Read the chapter and circle every truth about God. After doing this, go back and reread all that you have circled.

Jeremiah 9:23-25 says, ***“Thus says the Lord: ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.’”***

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Deuteronomy 32:4 adds, ***“The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he.”***

Kent Hughes also wrote, “God is perfect. Perfect in knowledge, wisdom, power, faithfulness, goodness, justice, mercy, grace, love, and holiness. Therefore he is perfect in his choices.”

So, is God a monster? No! His ways are good, right, and just. He knows what is good, right, and just better than we do. In the difficult truths of the Bible, we can sit in peace knowing how good the character of God is.

DEVOTION 4 BECAUSE I SAID SO

NATHAN ELLIOTT

When you were growing up and your parents asked you to do something, what kind of response did you get when you asked, “Why?” If you were like me, the answer I would often get was, “Because I said so.” As frustrating as this response was to me, it was hard to argue with. Ultimately, parents bring us into this world, and they are our authority as children. We may not like what they are telling us to do, but without them, we would not exist. So, who are we to argue? Paul makes a similar argument in his epistle to the Romans. Without God, there would be no people, animals, earth, or creation. He is the Author of all life and all things on Earth. We can say we are in control of our own lives, but biblically, God is sovereign over absolutely everything. He has every right to do with His creation as He wishes.

Romans 9:20-23 says, ***“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory.”***

When examining a difficult text like this, we must remember that we exist for the glory of God. In our salvation, sanctification, and glorification, God is glorified. As the world looks at us as Christians, we are viewed as different and set apart from non-believers. We are in the world but not of the world. Paul here describes people as vessels made by God. Our value and our purpose are defined

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by what our vessels contain. Some people God chooses to fill with mercy and give the gift of salvation. Other people, He allows to chase after their fleshly desires. Although God is not the author of evil, He does ordain evil. He works through evil and wicked men to bring about His purposes and desires.

As we dwell on this challenging passage, we must thank God for being willing to fill us with His immeasurable mercy. It is hard for us to comprehend how God works. However, what we do know is that God is willing to make a way for sinful men and women to be forgiven of their sins and be shown mercy. That way, it can be done through the person and work of Jesus Christ. As you go on with your day, remember that God is and always will be willing to offer you mercy even though no one deserves it.

DEVOTION 5 RENEGADE CLAY

PASTOR RYAN STORY

When I was in high school, my senior year was full of electives to help the time pass in a more enjoyable way. I was at the point where I only needed a few credits to graduate, so signing up for “blow-off” classes seemed like a good reward for three years of diligent work. One of the classes I thought was going to be a breeze was pottery. I love playing with Play-Doh, so how hard could it be? I was very much wrong about the simplicity of this class. In my head, it would be to grab some clay, throw it on a spinning wheel, and make some vases and bowls.

While continuing our study through Romans, I can only chuckle at God’s Word, saying, ***“But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?”*** (Romans 9:20-21). I first chuckle because of the audacity of truth that there are men who respond to the one and only holy Judge of the universe with a persecutory tone. The second chuckle I have learned is that as a potter, it seems as if the clay seemingly has a mind of its own if the potter does not properly guide the clay.

On a spinning wheel, there is an exact amount of pressure that a potter has to use in order to form the clay to exactly what the potter intends to make. Too little pressure and the clay does not turn out in the desired way; too little pressure and the entire piece can be ruined. Too often, I overlook that I am that clay that has a mind of its own. I believe I can go whichever way I desire, and God will catch up. Sin makes one stupid. The reality is our God does what He says. He accomplishes what He sets out to do. The difficulty is that we try

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to live like renegade clay and believe that we are like God. So, the strongest desire in our hearts is to have God meet our expectations.

If you take time and thumb through the Bible, find a time when someone is acting like a renegade piece of clay, and it is going well for them. Praise God that even when we are renegade pieces of clay, He ***“has endured with much patience”*** (Romans 9:22) and is not forceful in bringing us to Him. God is never One to just “throw it on the spinning wheel.” Because God is the God of His Word, He knows His plans will prevail and is slow, patient, and always guiding. Are there times He “starts over” and smashes a piece? Yes, the Bible tells us of examples, but there are many more examples of God’s graceful guiding hand where people who were the rebel clay are now God’s people. Pottery is difficult, and the God of the Bible is perfect at it. All we have to do is be willing to be clay that is moldable to His Word, will, and power.

DEVOTION 6

WHO ARE WE TO CHALLENGE GOD

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

When watching movies or reading books, I always love it when the good guys stand up and challenge the bad guys! It is always interesting to me that this story never seems to grow old. With most stories, many of us are rooting for or wanting the good guys to finally stand up. We do not like the ways that people are treated; therefore, we desire people to stand up.

In Romans 9:19-24, we read, ***“You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory - even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?”*** However, we can read in this section of Scripture that when it comes to our standing with God, sometimes we do not agree with how He has chosen to handle it. We have been challenged in this section of Scripture. The Bible asks questions or makes statements like, ***“Who can resist his will?”*** and who are you ***“to answer back to God?”***

It is a super interesting question to be asked from this passage. When you or I get the opportunity to be creative and are building something or creating something with clay, do we worry about what

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the clay or the building materials want to be? Obviously, we do not worry about these things. Well, this passage makes the same analogy for us to God, but we know that many of us question what God is doing. In our heads, we know that God is wiser and smarter than we are, but because we do not understand what God is doing, we challenge God. When we look at this world, we do not understand the suffering or the hurt. Many argue that we would not want to resist the Lord, but that is what we do when we want the good guys to stand up and push back against God.

We are often reminded that this would be considered foolish. Isaiah 45:9 reads, ***“Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’”*** It is God who determines everything about us. Let us remember: Who are we to challenge God?

The background of the entire page is a light-colored marbled paper with swirling, organic patterns in shades of grey, white, and pale yellow. The patterns resemble stone or liquid swirls.

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Lesson 5

Romans 9:30-10:21

THE HEART OF PAUL

Pastor Keaton Washburn

In Romans 9:1-29, Paul emphasizes God's sovereignty in choosing those to be saved. That is often referred to as Divine Election. As we pick it up in Romans 9:30-10:5, Paul transitions to showing the importance of human responsibility in salvation.

Read Romans 9:30-10:5 and look for the role of humans in salvation.

1. What failures of Israel (the Jewish people) does Paul draw out in those verses? What did they do or not do?

2. How do you think God's sovereignty and human responsibility can both exist at the same time?

While teaching on this passage, I heard a pastor say, "Where scriptures emphasize divine election (God's choice in salvation), I emphasize it. And where the scriptures emphasize human responsibility, I emphasize it." I think that is wisdom. We know from Scripture, clearly, that both exist. God chooses, and we must also choose Him. Both must be kept in tension. This is a matter of both, and, not one or the other. Some sects of Christianity stress one more than the other must be held as true or truer.

During this theological lesson from Paul, we also see his heart. Read Romans 10:1 again.

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3. What are some things you would say you care about? It might be people, hobbies, or activities. How do you know that you care about them?

Paul's prayers were connected to his care. The people he cared about, he prayed for. One of the most damaging things that a Christian can do is throw around the phrase, "I will pray for you," without action. Someone who makes that statement and then does not pray for that person is not only a liar but also gives false hope and hurts their witness for the sake of the Gospel.

4. Do you ever find yourself flippantly telling people you will pray for them? What steps have you taken or can you take to make sure you follow through?

A couple of years ago, a mentor of mine at the time gave me the advice to pray for people right when they ask. If someone asks for prayer after a Sunday morning gathering, I ask them if I can pray for them right then and there and make a practice of that as much as possible. Sometimes it can feel awkward in the moment, but it has always been worth it.

To summarize Paul's idea, this section shows Israel's failure to live by faith. For much of the Old Testament times, it was shown by their obedience to the Law for the sake of their salvation. In the times that Paul originally wrote this letter, the Israelite's failure was shown in their rejection of faith in Christ, still believing that their obedience would grant them salvation.

A Jewish professor of mine at Moody Bible Institute, Dr. Michael Rydelnik, shared that his father had suffered greatly. His father's first wife, five sons, and an adopted daughter were all killed by the Nazis in Auschwitz. His father experienced the concentration camps himself, lost his second wife in childbirth, and another daughter drowned to death. After moving to America, his third wife and three of his children (including Michael, my professor) came to saving faith in Christ. Michael's father then disowned his wife and children and moved to Israel. Michael, upon the death of his father in 1996, came to these difficult conclusions: "Jewish people, in fact, all people, are lost without faith in Yeshua as their Redeemer and Jewish people, and Gentiles must have conscious faith in Yeshua to experience God's forgiveness and receive the promise of life in the world to come." Even Jewish people must choose to accept Christ, taking the role of human responsibility, as we will see more in-depth soon in Romans 10:9, ***"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."***

5. When did you make the profession of Christ as your Lord? What role did God play in choosing you first? How did you sense His call, and what led you to respond?

Paul transitions from this idea of the failure of the Israelites to true salvation through faith in the next section, Romans 10:6-21.

Marvin C. Pate, in his commentary on Romans, outlines the steps to salvation that Paul lays out in this section:

- A preacher is sent to declare the Good News (verse 14)
- The Good News is heard (verse 14)
- The Good News is believed (verse 14)
- The individual calls on the name of the Lord (verses 12–13)

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6. How did you see these steps play out in your life? Who was sent to preach to you? What was the message you heard? What led you to believe in Christ? What words did you cry out to the Lord with?

If you are not Jewish, you are a Gentile. To this day, many Jewish people have heard the Good News of Jesus but have chosen to reject Him as Messiah (the Promised One). If you have cried out in faith for Christ to save you from your sins, you are the fulfillment of Paul's words in this section of Romans.

As Gentiles are grafted into salvation (Romans 11, next week's study), this takes place to make God's chosen people who were first offered salvation, the Israelites, jealous. Read Romans 10:19, ***"But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, 'I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.'"***

Would you consider, prayerfully, who the Lord is sending you to preach the Gospel to? A mentor of mine that I meet with monthly asks me a convicting pair of questions every month:

- Who have you shared the Gospel with this month?
- Who are you discipling currently?

Some months, those questions are more difficult to answer than I would like them to be.

7. So I ask you, the reader, the same. Who have you shared the Gospel with this month?" As Paul shows, how will people believe unless they hear?

If you are meeting as a group, take time tonight to split up into groups of 3-4 people and pray through Romans 10:12-17. Ask God to send you out to those that need to hear the Gospel.

NOTES

DEVOTION 1 SLACKER

KARSEN THEEDE

When I was in school, I dreaded two words: group project. I knew that meant there was going to be one kid in the group who would not do any work but would write their name on the final project, enjoy the rest of the group's hard work, and the eventual grade. I am sure everyone has experienced this situation or something similar, whether that be in the workplace, church, or even our family and friends. This common situation is universally irritating, but in a way, Christians have been the ones to freeload off of the work of someone else.

Right now, we are going through the book of Romans and this week, we are focusing specifically on chapter 9. Romans 9:30-32 states, ***“What shall we say, then? That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone.”***

The work that I am speaking of is the work of Jesus Christ, and more specifically, the miracle of His death on the cross. What Christ did for us that day is He stepped in between God and us, taking the punishment that we deserved for our sins, giving us the opportunity of salvation, or as Romans calls it, ***“righteousness.”*** Something very interesting about Romans chapter 9 is that it also talks about pursuing righteousness through our actions. No matter what we do, we cannot earn our own salvation through our actions. Why is that? It is because if we were able to do it on our own, save ourselves from our own sins so we can be in a right standing with God, Jesus' sacrifice for us would mean nothing. Our actions can never reach

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God's perfect standards. Thankfully, He sent Jesus to reach them for us.

Our relationship with God is the only time you should be glad to have written your name on a project you did not take part in. Jesus' sacrifice is better than our efforts could have ever been if we were in control of making ourselves righteous.

DEVOTION 2
**PRAYER FOR THE SALVATION
OF SOMEONE WE LOVE**

PASTOR CALEB COMBS

Are you earnestly praying for someone you know to receive Jesus Christ as their Savior and be saved? It might be a family member, friend, coworker, or neighbor. I do not know who that person is for you, but as followers of Jesus, this should be an integral part of our daily walk.

In Amos chapter 7, the prophet Amos pleads with God for salvation and mercy for Israel. His prayer reflects a deep passion and longing to see them saved. Similarly, in Romans 10:1-4, Paul writes a prayer of desperation for the salvation of those he loves, ***“Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God’s righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.”***

Paul’s heart is burdened with a deep desire for the children of Israel to be saved. This longing is so intense that in Romans chapter 9, he even says he would be willing to be accursed from God for the sake of his people if only they would believe and be saved. Paul’s desperation is unmistakable. He explains that although they know God, they are ignorant of the way to salvation. That way to salvation is Jesus Christ.

Like the Israelites, we are all separated from God because of sin, and because of that separation, we deserve the punishment of death. Yet, Jesus made a way. He declared that He is the only way

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to the Father. We must repent of our sins, believe that Jesus Christ came to Earth, lived a sinless life, died on the cross, rose again on the third day, and is coming back. This is the way to righteousness, not the mere knowledge of God.

According to a 2023 survey, 73% of Americans claim to believe in God. However, belief in God alone is not the way to salvation. Even Satan believes in God's existence. Paul's words remind us that believing in God is not enough; salvation comes only through Jesus Christ.

Now, as I asked at the beginning of this devotion, are you praying desperately for the salvation of someone you love? When you read this, did a specific name come to mind? Perhaps it was a child, grandchild, parent, or friend? Whoever it may be, I understand the desperation you feel. As you read, you may resonate with Paul's pain and longing.

Let me encourage you: continue to pray for them. Pray for them by name every day. Ask the Holy Spirit to move in their hearts so that they would make Jesus the Lord of their life. Pray that as Jesus stands at the door of their heart and knocks, they will respond and invite Him in.

Heavenly Father, I come before You with a heart full of love and hope for [Name]. You know their heart, their struggles, and their needs better than I do. Lord, I pray that You draw them closer to You in a way that only You can. Open their eyes to see Your truth, soften their heart to receive Your love, and fill them with a longing to know You personally.

Holy Spirit, I ask that You work in their life, removing any barriers or doubts that keep them from embracing the gift of salvation. Surround them with people who reflect Your grace and speak Your truth, and give them experiences that reveal Your presence and power.

Lord Jesus, thank You for the sacrifice You made for all of us on the cross. I pray that [Name] would come to understand and accept the depth of Your love and the forgiveness You offer. Let their heart be transformed by Your grace, and may they find peace, joy, and purpose in a relationship with You.

Thank You, Father, for Your faithfulness. I trust that You are working even now in ways I may not see. I commit [Name] into Your loving hands, knowing that Your will is perfect.

In Jesus' mighty name, I pray. Amen.

DEVOTION 3

PUBLIC CONFESSION

JOANNA MONTGOMERY

Have you ever played a board game, and the person you were going to play with decided, rather than reading you the instructions, that they would just explain the game to you? I have found that, so often, when that happens, the directions are confusing and it takes way more time than it would have to just read the directions from the box.

Sometimes, it feels like our Christian walk can be like that. We do not actually read what the Bible says; instead, we listen to someone speak about the Bible and we try to understand their interpretation, which might even be based on someone else's opinion that they heard. It is so important to know what the Bible actually says.

Have you ever heard someone say that to be saved, you have to make a public confession? I have heard many people claim that this is what the Bible says. This idea comes from our passage today. Romans 10:9-10 states, ***“Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved.”***

Many people believe this passage is saying that to be saved, a person has to make a public confession of faith. However, is that really what Paul is saying? Some people believe that if you do not raise your hand in a service or walk forward to the front of the sanctuary, you are not really sincere about wanting salvation. Is that true, though? What about someone who cannot speak? How could they ever be saved? In Luke 23:42-43, the thief on the cross did not make a public confession of faith, and yet Christ told him, ***“Today you will be with me in paradise.”*** So, how is it that one person has

to make a public confession, and others do not? That is why it is so important to read the Bible for ourselves.

In this passage, Paul is not really saying you have to make a public confession in order to be saved. Paul states that for salvation, an individual needs to agree with the words of their mouth and the love in their heart. The mouth and the heart should be in complete harmony; they should demonstrate the same thing. As followers of Christ, we believe in Him with our heart, our total personality, and everything that we are. This is faith. It is what God asks that we have: faith in Him. God is not asking us for a public confession. He is telling us that our confession, or what we speak, should be in complete agreement with our hearts. People who publicly pray a prayer may not really mean the words they say, even if the prayer is amazing and it is given with great impact. They might give lip service to God while their heart does not really care about Christ at all. If we make a public confession, we need to be completely certain that we are not just saying idle words that mean nothing to us personally.

So, why would anyone bother confessing publicly if they do not want to be saved, and do not have any faith in God? Confession without faith could be done because someone is self-deceived or because of hypocrisy, or maybe cowardice, but confession with faith is what reveals true salvation.

Look again, ***“For with the heart one believes and is justified.”*** Our heart is what God looks at for salvation. What does our heart want? God sees our true intent, not our attempt to be impressive. With the mouth, one confesses that salvation. A spoken confession of that faith is what happens when our heart is aligned with God. When our heart believes, loves, and trusts God, we will confess the salvation we have received and tell others of what Christ has done for us. We confess, even publicly, our salvation.

DEVOTION 4

THE WORD IS NEAR YOU

CHRIS MONTVILLE

“For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) ‘or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim).” Romans 10:5-8

I am not sure what it was about these verses, but for the longest time, I had no idea what Paul was talking about here. I have a highlight color in my Bible that I use when I come across a passage that confuses me, and this one sat in that color for quite a while until recently. Our wrestle with Scripture is often part of the beauty of it. When we do not understand something, it causes us to dig deeper into it where God can reveal awesome things that connect all across His Word, and that leads us into deeper awe of His beauty.

Paul, in this passage, is breaking down the contrast between righteousness through the Law and righteousness through faith. Paul, being a former Pharisee, uses the Old Testament to prove his points incredibly well throughout the New Testament. Part of my confusion about this passage was that I did not realize he was quoting the Old Testament. Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12-14, where Moses is talking to the Israelites, explaining to them that they have the Law in their grasp, and it is now up to them to follow it.

Paul uses that illustration to drive out the fact that our faith is based on Jesus, who has come to fulfill the Law for us. Our faith is not in future questions yet to be answered, but in a risen Savior who is

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alive and active in our world today! John Stott, in his commentary on Romans, states that this passage is Paul's way of saying, "There is no need for us to scale the heights or plumb the depths in search of Christ, for he has already come, died and risen, and is accessible to us."

Jesus has come, and He has given everyone who believes in Him full access to the Father. Romans 10:9 says, ***"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."***

Christ is near to you right now. You do not need to go out looking for Him. Take some time to acknowledge His presence and thank Him for all that He has done for us.

DEVOTION 5
**PREACH JESUS,
PREACH JESUS, PREACH JESUS**

DAVID HUDGENS

If you have ever spent time with me in conversation, then you know I often speak about my father and the impact he had on my faith. In fact, I mention him so frequently that a friend once made a playful wager with his son about how long it would take for me to bring up the subject of my dad in a recent sermon I shared at Grand Blanc (the answer: not long). In all seriousness, though, my dad was a gifted evangelist, and God used him greatly to shape my understanding of what it means to follow Jesus in faith and obedience.

However, as a teenager, my dad's relentless evangelism used to drive me crazy. He would talk to anyone about Jesus - whether it was the waitress at a restaurant or the person taking our movie tickets. Ashamedly, I admit that at the time, it always felt over the top and awkward. In my youthful, spiritually immature opinion, I just wanted to experience normal, quiet days without feeling like I was part of his public "outreach program."

What I did not understand then, and what I understand now, is that my dad was not being annoying. Rather, he was living out his true calling. You see, in his late 20s, he had been radically transformed by Jesus and deeply embraced the words of Jesus in Matthew 9:37-38: ***"The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."*** After surrendering his life to Jesus, my dad saw the world with new, spiritual eyes, understanding that every person's need for the Gospel was great. As a result, he responded to God's call to preach the hope of the Gospel wherever he went and to whomever he came into contact with.

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In Romans 10:14, Paul asks, ***“How are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?”*** The Gospel does not reach the lost unless believers, who have likewise been made new by it, share it. Just like my dad, all of us who follow Jesus are called to be such messengers. God’s desire is for the world to hear the Good News of Jesus. He has called us into partnership with Christ to share His message.

For a while, I resisted this truth. I did not want to be like my dad, always talking about Jesus. However, now, I see that his devotion was not a burden. It was a privilege! The more I grow in my love for and devotion to Jesus, the more I want to be like my dad, boldly proclaiming the Gospel and faithfully sharing the Good News with anyone, anytime. As Paul says in Ephesians 4:13, we are all called to grow ***“to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,”*** and that includes sharing the Gospel wherever we go.

So, let us follow this call together. Let us preach Jesus at all times, to all people. My desire these days is to have the same passion and boldness that my father had. Better still, I desire to have the same passion and boldness of Jesus, so that I may preach His message of salvation with urgency until Jesus returns.

DEVOTION 6

PUT THE SHOVEL DOWN

GRANT GRIMES

“But I ask, have they not heard? Indeed they have, for ‘Their voice has gone out to all the earth, and their words to the ends of the world.’ But I ask, did Israel not understand? First Moses says, ‘I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation; with a foolish nation I will make you angry.’ Then Isaiah is so bold as to say, ‘I have been found by those who did not seek me; I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me.’ But of Israel he says, ‘All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.’” Romans 10:18-21

In Romans 10:18-21, Paul wrestles with the question of whether Israel has heard and understood the message of salvation.

I remember that, as a child, when I was corrected by my parents, I would often try to avoid admitting my disobedience and sin. Instead, I would say I had not heard what they said, that I did not understand, or simply that I did not want to do what they asked. It was easier to make excuses than to face the reality of my actions. Like a child, this is how Israel acted toward the Lord. As my mother used to say, I simply did not “put down the shovel.”

There was no excuse for Israel’s disobedience. They had been given the truth by God and day after day, they were corrected by leaders appointed by Him. Yet, despite all of this, they refused to listen. Like a child trying to avoid consequences, I used every excuse in the book. So has Israel. In Romans, Paul is telling believers that there is no escaping God’s wrath on sin. There is no fleeing from the consequences of rejecting God’s truth. We need salvation, and God has revealed the way through His Son, Jesus Christ. We must cast away all of our excuses and facades before the Lord.

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At the end of this passage, Isaiah speaks for the Lord, declaring that the conversation is over, ***“All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people.”*** My mother used to say, “I am the parent, and you are the child; there is no discussion.” This is how the Lord handles direct disobedience. He is God, and we are not. There is no wiggle room or negotiation. We have fallen short of God’s perfect standard and are in desperate need of a Savior.

Just like Israel, we have been a disobedient and contrary people. Yet, the Lord continues to extend His hand, longing for us to repent and believe in Jesus Christ. So many times, we try to squirm out of the Lord’s holy and righteous discipline. In these moments, we need to understand that in order to get out of the hole, we need to put down the shovel.

The background of the entire page is a light-colored marbled paper with swirling, organic patterns in shades of grey, white, and pale yellow. The patterns resemble stone or liquid swirls.

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Lesson 6

Romans 11:1-36†

THE MYSTERY

Pastor Patrick Bicknell

One of my favorite things to do is to mess with the people I love. Is that rude? Maybe, but it is one of my love languages. I specifically like to do this with my son. I like to mess with him in a playful way. He loves to eat at McDonalds, and sometimes, we will use that as a reward or something for him to look forward to at the end of the day. Now, if you have kids, you know that they will never forget something that you promised them. All day, he has been thinking about McDonalds and talking to me about McDonalds. Eventually, we got in the car, and he immediately asks me, “Are we going to McDonalds?” This is where I mess with him and say, “What? McDonalds?” I pretend that I forgot about promising him McDonalds. He gets sad and thinks we are driving to a random place until he sees those beautiful golden arches and exclaims, “Dad! You tricked me!” The excitement in his voice gets me every time. Will he eventually stop falling for it? Probably, but it is so much fun.

1. Can you think of a time when your parents did this to you? Have you done this to your kids before?

Romans chapter 11 talks about God’s promise to the nation of Israel, and it begins with a massive question that Paul asks in verse 1: ***“I ask, then, has God rejected his people?”*** He is addressing a question that many people were asking at the time and one that I am sure many of us will ask if we look at the state of the Jewish people. They have rejected Christ, they crucified Christ, and they refuse to follow Jesus as the Savior of the world. Does this mean that God has forgotten about His people and the covenant made with them? I would encourage you this week to read through Romans 11:1-24 to hear Paul’s response about the hardening of Israel. First, let us go back to the original covenant God made with Israel.

Genesis 17:7-8 records, ***“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout***

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their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God."

2. Do you think this promise has already been fulfilled to Israel?

3. Could the people of Israel have made this promise void because of their disobedience?

Starting in Romans 11:25, after detailing what Israel's disobedience meant and how we, as Gentiles, have been grafted into the people of God, Paul gives us the mystery of how this promise will one day be fulfilled to the people of Israel. Romans 11:25-27 says, "***Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, 'The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob'; 'and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.'***" I am glad Paul called it a mystery because it really is mysterious. How will there be salvation for the nation of Israel? It is a beautiful mystery because it gives us another glimpse into the amazing goodness and mercy of our Heavenly Father. His faithfulness endures forever!

4. What does Paul mean when he says, ***“Until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in”***?

5. When Paul says ***“all Israel,”*** does that mean every single Jew, or does it have a different meaning?

6. Do you think Paul is referring to a “spiritual” Israel or an “ethnic” Israel here? Explain your thinking.

Paul goes on to write how it is possible that the nation of Israel as a whole will come to salvation in the next few verses. Romans 11:28-32 states, ***“As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”***

How wonderful this doctrine of election is! God made the covenant. He made the promise. He will be faithful to that. We do not need to worry if one day He will forget about us like some people think He forgot about the people of Israel. He never forgot them. He always had a plan for them. His mercy is greater than any disobedience.

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7. What does this mystery teach you about the character of God?

8. Why should it be encouraging for us to know that God still has a plan to fulfill His promise to the nation of Israel?

This amazing reality will come to pass at the Second Coming of Christ. When the Gospel has been proclaimed to every tribe, nation, and tongue and the fullness of those whom God has elected among the Gentiles will be brought in, then God will shift His focus to the people of Israel during His Millennial Kingdom. When He comes again, He is saying that they will see Jesus as the Savior He really is, and they will turn to Him and repent of their sins. This truth should leave us responding the way Paul does in Romans 11:33-36, ***“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.”***

9. Do you enjoy contemplating the mysteries of God's plan? Why or why not?

10. How can you practically praise God for the mysteries of His plan this week?

NOTES

DEVOTION 1

IT IS ALWAYS FOR OUR GOOD

JOSH THAYER

Today, we are diving into a passage in Romans that deals with some big questions: “What is God’s plan for Israel? Does God still have a future for His chosen people?” Paul addresses this in Romans 11:1-10.

Here is how he starts in verse 1: ***“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.”*** Paul begins by making it clear that God has not rejected Israel. God’s promises are never broken, and despite Israel’s history of straying, His love and commitment remain constant.

Paul then reminds us of Elijah’s story (verses 2-4), a time when Elijah felt completely alone in his faith. Elijah thought he was the only one left who was true to God, but God reassured him: ***“I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.”*** Even when it looked like all hope was lost, God had preserved a faithful remnant.

What does that mean for Israel’s future? Paul says, ***“So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace”*** (verse 5). Even now, God is working among the Jewish people, preserving a group who remain faithful to Him. This remnant is not based on their works or performance but on God’s grace. Grace is at the heart of God’s relationship with His people. It is a gift, unearned and undeserved, both for Israel and for us.

In verses 7-10, Paul goes deeper, saying that while some in Israel have hardened their hearts, God’s promises still stand. ***“What***

then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened...” This hardening is not God’s permanent judgment but rather a temporary state. God’s plan is unfolding, and He still has a future for Israel. This hardening is a part of His greater plan to eventually bring both Jews and Gentiles into His Kingdom.

So, what can we take away from this? First, it reminds us of God’s faithfulness. Even when people stray or resist Him, He does not abandon His promises. Second, it is a call to trust God’s timing. He has a plan for Israel, for the Church, and for each of us that He is faithfully working out, even when it seems slow or unclear.

As we go about our day, let us remember that God is always faithful to His promises. If He is that committed to Israel, we can trust He is committed to us, too. His love and grace are steadfast, and His plan, though sometimes hard to understand, is always for our good.

DEVOTION 2

GOD'S MEGAPHONE

MARK PITTENGER

There is always so much to unpack when reading a passage written by Paul! Sometimes, it can seem a bit overwhelming to figure out where to even begin. This is where I find myself when approaching Romans 11:1-10. Paul writes, ***“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? ‘Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life.’ But what is God’s reply to him? ‘I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.’ So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written, ‘God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.’ And David says, ‘Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.’”***

Paul addresses the Gentiles on the issue of the Jews rejecting Christ. Paul, a Jew himself, says just because the Jews rejected Christ does not mean that God has rejected them as a group! Some Jews acknowledge Jesus as the Christ. There is a remnant. The Jews are God’s chosen people, but what exactly does that mean?

First, for what purpose did God choose them? We have to go back to Genesis 12:2, where we see God chose Abraham. The verse reads,

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” From Abraham came Israel. In Exodus chapter 19, we see God chose Israel to be His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation (Exodus 19:5-6). This meant that Israel was to represent God to the rest of the nations. They were God’s megaphone.

Fast forward some 1,400 years, and we are faced with Jesus. He is a Jew Who was sent to be the perfect representation of God for the nations. God had a plan all along. All the way back in the Garden of Eden, there was a plan. When God addresses the serpent in Genesis 3:15, we see His plan of salvation. It all comes to fruition with the death and resurrection of Jesus. So, even though the Jews rejected the Redeemer, it does not deny the nation the promise of redemption. God is truth and, therefore, cannot lie. So, when God told them they were His possession, that is it. Done deal! They are His people, and through them, the Savior was given.

What is really awesome is that there is a place for both Jews and Gentiles in eternity. Romans 10:12 adds, ***“For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him.”*** For that, we can rejoice! For that, we can praise, for it is all part of God’s plan!

A Jew or Gentile can be saved if they give their life to the Lord. However, the Jew or Gentile who rejects the Gospel will face eternal separation from God. The blood of Jesus covers the sins of all people, Jew or Gentile!

DEVOTION 3

GENTILES GRAFTED IN

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD

Being a part of a team is a special bond. Over the years, I have been a part of a variety of teams through work, school, a few sports, and, yes - video games. One word that crosses over the threshold of all these teams is unity. The incredible thing about Paul and his ministry, being a Jew himself, is his passion for all people, no matter their nationality. In Acts chapter 18, as Paul was sharing the Gospel in the synagogue and was rejected by the Jewish people, he shook off his cloak and declared his ministry to the Gentiles instead.

Here in Romans 11:11-16, we read the same undertone of Paul ministering to the Gentiles because of the Jewish people's rejection of Jesus. We read, ***“So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.”*** Although the Jewish people are rejecting the Gospel of Christ, even in Paul's frustration, he desires that through the Gentiles heeding the Gospel, it would be an example and even a reconsideration of the truth for God's people.

Unity is an essential part of life. John 1:12 speaks of those who believe in Christ, are called children of God, and are adopted

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together into His family. Paul declares in Galatians 3:28, ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”*** This is the true unity that is brought only through Jesus Christ. This is the unity that Paul is desiring, preaching, and fighting for. The reality is that when we are on a team, sometimes we need our teammates to build us up, encourage us, and lead by example. That is what Paul is preaching and desiring for the Jewish people: that they would see the work the Gospel is doing in the lives of the Gentiles, and it would stir up a conviction and desire for them to unite and be obedient to the Gospel of Christ.

DEVOTION 4

AN UNNATURAL GRAFTING

PASTOR MITCHELL HOLMES

When I was a child, it was not uncommon for me to get into fights with my sister. We would fight over anything and everything. Sometimes, things would escalate to the point that we would involve our parents. At that time in my life, there were very few things that I enjoyed more than taking an issue to my parents, only for them to take my side of the argument and tell my sister to make amends. I would express my enjoyment by sticking my tongue out at my sister and taunting her. This would sometimes lead to me getting reprimanded by my parents as well as my sister because I was being a brat.

As silly as those childish interactions were, they are a natural, fleshly desire that many of us struggle against, even as adults. In our passage today, we are going to see Paul warn us about how we compose ourselves. Specifically, he is addressing non-Jewish believers in Christ. Read Romans 11:17-27. Specifically, I want to highlight verse 18: ***“Do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you.”***

Paul is encouraging Gentile Christians, a group that we all are a part of, to be very careful when considering Jews and Israelites. It should not be in our nature to be boastful of our salvation in Christ or to rub it in the faces of unbelieving Jews. Paul is trying to help us realize, through the imagery of grafting, that we are extremely blessed. The process of grafting usually involves attaching a healthy, fruit-producing branch to a wild tree to upgrade it. The imagery Paul is using here is of the reverse. He speaks of grafting a branch with no fruit onto a tree that is healthy and producing.

It is our faith alone, in Jesus Christ alone, that saves us. It is important to remind ourselves of this fact daily. By reflecting on the

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great sacrifice of Christ on the cross, we posture our hearts towards humility and meekness. It is not because of our works that we are saved, so we must meticulously root out any arrogance in our lives. It is also important for us to recognize that Jewish unbelievers are not our opponents; they are not to be sneered at. Instead, we must recognize them as the lost people that they are, who need a Savior all the same as every other person around us. Susan Perlman, a missionary to Jewish people, wrote, “A subtle form of anti-Semitism is to deny Jewish people a hearing of the gospel and not care about their eternal destiny.”

I challenge you today to find a way to daily remind yourself of the fact that it is through the cross that we are saved, and to humbly thank God for His sacrifice for us. Secondly, ask God to reveal to you opportunities to reach people with the Good News of salvation found in Christ, regardless of their religious background and ethnicity.

DEVOTION 5

A PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

RICH SAWICKI

God's Big Plan

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” Romans 11:33

Romans 11:28-35 reminds us that God's plans are so much bigger and better than anything we can imagine. Paul explains that God's decisions are beyond our understanding, but we can trust that He knows what He is doing. Even when life feels confusing or hard, we can believe that God is working things out for our good and His glory.

The Puzzle Piece

Puzzles can be fun. I read a story of a girl who got a puzzle for Christmas. It was a really tricky one of a mountain scene with 1,000 pieces. As she worked, she found a small gray piece that did not seem to fit anywhere. It did not match the sky or the trees, so she set it aside, feeling frustrated. Later, as she finished the puzzle, she realized that the gray piece fits perfectly into the mountain's rocky base. It was not useless; it was an important part of the picture!

Life can feel like that gray puzzle piece. Sometimes, things happen that do not make sense, and we wonder if they have a purpose. Yet, God sees the whole picture of our lives, and every part fits into His perfect plan.

The Future of Israel

Paul also talks about how God's plans for Israel fit into His bigger plan. Right now, many people in Israel do not believe in Jesus, but Paul says this is not the end of the story. God has not given up on Israel. In the future, He promises to bring them back to faith. This shows us that God is faithful to His promises, even when it seems like nothing is happening.

Just like a puzzle piece can seem useless, Israel's current unbelief might look like a dead end. However, God's plan is still unfolding. One day, His promises to Israel will come true, showing His mercy and love for all people.

What This Means for You

Romans chapter 11 teaches us that God's wisdom is so much greater than ours. Just as the puzzle piece and God's promises to Israel show, He always has a plan, even when we cannot see it. Think about a time in your life when something did not go the way you hoped but turned out for the better. Thank God for working in ways you do not always understand. Trust Him to guide your future, just like He is guiding the future of Israel. God is like a master puzzle maker, putting every piece of your life and the world into the perfect place.

DEVOTION 6

WHO AM I TO QUESTION?

KATIE PETTIBONE

“Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ‘or who has given a gift to him or he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” Romans 11:33-36

In this passage, Paul is speaking to the Jews about the topic of salvation. At this point in history, salvation is offered to everyone. Meaning that Jesus had come and died on the cross for the sins of the entire world. However, there were some Jews who did not like this idea, and Paul tried his best to correct their mindset by pointing them to God’s mercy for all. Paul does a great job of putting God on the throne, explaining that God is merciful over all, and basically stating, “Who are we compared to God?”

This makes me think of the concept of “putting yourself on a pedestal.” I remember when I was a child, my mom would remind me to be careful when doing so. She would remind me to always do what the Bible says, “Put God first.” I remember always trying to correct myself and make sure I was putting God first. Thanks, Mom, for instilling that in me. Without that being instilled in me, I would be in a very dark place right now. In relation to this passage, Paul is correcting the Jews in this way.

However, we see that the Jews were putting themselves in the place of God by casting judgment and questioning salvation for the Gentiles. Paul shuts this down. He points the people to God, saying in verse 32, ***“For God has cosigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.”*** Basically, he was saying that if God the

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Creator, Author, Finisher, Father, King of Kings, and the great ***“I Am”*** (Exodus 3) can have mercy on everyone in the world, who are we to not?

That is just it! Who are we to judge God’s final judgments? Who are we, as dust (Genesis), to determine the salvation of another? God, who is good, full of mercy, and without sin, loves everyone. I love the passage from Romans chapter 11 because it points out the wonder of God. It signifies how we will never fully understand Him because of how great He is. Yet, to know that He still loves all and has made a way for all to be saved is absolutely amazing to me. God, Who is so great, and still loves me this much is breathtaking.

Have you been putting yourself on the pedestal where the Lord should be? Have you been determining others’ outcomes based on their sin? Let me remind you of this, ***“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost”*** (Luke 19:10). We are all lost and born into this broken world, and there is one Man who can save you. Jesus loves us so much. He came and died on the cross for you, me, and the person who did you wrong. It is time to put the Almighty God first and follow Him. Take a moment to pray and ask the Lord to correct ***“any grievous way”*** in you and point you to what is everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).

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Lesson 7

Romans 12:1-2

BECOME A LIVING SACRIFICE

Pastor Patrick Bicknell

I am a very big football fan. My favorite teams are Michigan (Go Blue!) and the Lions - I am not afraid to admit that anymore, thankfully, but we will see how well this lesson ages. I will watch every single Michigan game and most Lions games, depending on what time they play on Sundays. I have always found it interesting how most fans who watch the games think that what the players are doing is easy. For example, I cannot tell you how many times I have said, "How do you drop that pass!" not even considering some of the factors that go into catching the ball, like how fast the quarterback throws it, another grown man trying to tackle you, needing to stop on a dime, and other things like that. I bet if an NFL wide receiver were to talk to me after I say something like that, he would reply, "It is a lot easier said than done."

1. What are some things you can think of that are easier said than done?

Sacrifice is one of those things that are easier said than done. When it comes to giving up something that we love or desire, sacrifice is hard. Likewise, even when it is something that we need to lay down, like a sin struggle or bad habit, that can be hard, too. However, sacrifice is a very important of how we worship the Lord and live as followers of His.

Romans 12:1 talks about what our sacrifice is, ***"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."*** Now, when I used to read that verse, I focused more on the end where it says ***"spiritual worship."*** I always assumed that this meant I needed to do good things, tell people about Jesus, and sing songs of praise to Him. Those are all great things; however, I think the more important part to focus on in

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this passage is when Paul mentions us being **“a living sacrifice.”** Understanding this part first will help us to know what our spiritual worship is toward the Lord.

2. When you hear the word **“sacrifice,”** what do you think of?

3. Why do you think presenting ourselves as a **“living sacrifice”** is considered our **“spiritual worship”**?

Luke 9:23 says, **“And he said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’”** I think this is a great description from the Lord Jesus on what it means to be a living sacrifice. Sacrifice requires that something must die; something must be given up. We need to continuously deny ourselves, empty ourselves, and lay down the parts of us that keep us from following God. This is our spiritual worship. It is not simply doing good spiritual things. It is having the mindset that whatever keeps us from following God more deeply and more intimately, we will lay that down as a sacrifice to the Lord.

4. Are you someone who struggles with letting things go? Why or why not?

5. Can you share a time when you felt the conviction to give something up in your life?

Paul continues this idea of continually laying down our lives to the Lord in Romans 12:2, which says, ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”*** Again, we come back to the idea that it is easier said than done. Talking about laying our lives down as a living sacrifice to God when we are in a Growth Community with other believers is not hard to do. Yet, how do we act on Thursday morning when we are at work with our non-believing coworkers? This is what Paul addresses in verse 2. A commentary I read said, “Whereas verse 1 has called for a decisive commitment, verse 2 deals with the maintenance of that commitment.”

6. What does being conformed to this world look like? What are ways that you have conformed to this world?

7. Why does Paul add that we need to be transformed ***“by the renewal of your mind”***?

8. What in your life makes it difficult to be transformed rather than ***“conformed to this world”***?

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Unfortunately, once we become followers of Christ, all of our problems do not go away. In fact, I believe that is when attacks from Satan and temptation can be thrown at us at an increased rate. The world that we live in is fallen, sinful, and broken. It is hard to be in the world but not of the world. However, we are not alone. The Spirit lives within us, and He will always be there to help. The benefit of being transformed far outweighs any of the struggles that this world can throw at us. There is a verse I love to run back to when I get to talk about topics like this. It is Luke 9:24, which says, ***“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”*** When we are called to make our lives a sacrifice and to be ***“transformed by the renewal of our minds,”*** we are not losing anything; we are gaining everything in Christ.

9. What are some of the benefits you have experienced by laying your life down as a sacrifice?

10. How has following God become more joyful the more that your mind has been transformed?

It is by the mercy of God that we are able to follow God and make our lives a living sacrifice unto Him. I read a quote by Charles Spurgeon that I think ends this lesson well. He said, “Praise God with the heart He has changed, the lips He has loosed, and the life He has spared.”

NOTES

DEVOTION 1 WORSHIP: MORE THAN MUSIC

MARK PITTENGER

When I think of the word worship, my mind immediately thinks about singing along with music. Sunday mornings during the Gathering, we worship with singing. Driving down the road, while singing along with the worship music that is playing through the speakers via Spotify, is also worship. However, the Apostle Paul tells us that worship is more than music.

In Romans 12:1, Paul says, ***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*** The first thing we see Paul point out is that we can only do anything by the mercies of God! We see that the word mercies is plural, meaning God’s mercy is a continuous gift given more than once, which ultimately points to Jesus paying for our sins on the cross. It is because of these mercies that we should present ourselves as living sacrifices to God.

In the Old Testament, priests made sacrifices to God. These sacrifices were animals that were killed. The blood of a pure animal had to be shed. In the New Testament, we see that Jesus eliminated the need for a continual blood sacrifice by offering Himself on the cross. His blood was shed once and for all. This is why Paul says to present ourselves as a ***“living sacrifice.”*** Paul is echoing the words of Jesus from Luke 9:23, ***“And he [Jesus] said to all, ‘If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.’”*** We must make an intentional choice daily to live our lives in a way that reflects Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus is not something that takes place only on Sunday. Worshiping

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God does not only take place when we lift our hands and sing along to music. It should take place in every action we make, the words that we speak, and every breath that we take. The darkness of this world should be overthrown by the light of Jesus shining through our lives. Paul says in Galatians 2:20, ***“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.”*** Jesus is alive, and His Holy Spirit dwells in each of His followers.

So, just as every aspect of Scripture points to Jesus, every aspect of our lives should as well. I challenge you to pause for a moment and ask yourself if there is anything in your life that you need to give to God. Maybe you are holding back a part of your life that you do not want anybody to see. Give it fully to God. Remember, while singing worship is not a bad thing, choosing to be a living sacrifice daily is our true worship.

John 4:23-24 adds, ***“But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”***

DEVOTION 2 THE BEST GIFT

ADELINE SANCHEZ

My sister and I love picking out gifts for each other for birthdays and Christmas. We love it so much that over the years, it has now become an unspoken competition of who can give the other the best gift. Obviously, both of us are always exceedingly grateful for any gift from each other, but I do personally tend to feel really guilty when her gift to me is better than my gift to her. It really is a silly, meaningless competition, but we truly take it to heart. All I want every year is to give her the best gift I possibly can because I love her, and I want to repay her for all the love and joy she brings to my life. Imagine you were given a gift that was so extravagant and valuable that you would never be able to repay the person back for that gift, no matter how hard you tried. How would you respond to such an incredible gift?

This is just like the gift God has given us. God, through Jesus, granted us, wicked sinners, eternal life with Him and all we have to do to receive this gift is confess and believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus. How on Earth can we even begin to repay God for such a gift?

Romans 12:1 says, ***“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”*** Paul is calling us to give ourselves to God not out of obligation but out of gratitude and worship in response to His great mercy. Offering yourself as a ***“living sacrifice”*** to God does not just mean offering your Sunday mornings or your nightly prayer time to God. This means offering every part of yourself to God, including your work, relationships, daily decisions, and your body. Paul is calling you to surrender all of yourself to God to use for His glory every day. This

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surrender should be a continuous act of worship to God every day in your life where you surrender all plans and choices for the day to God's great plan and seek to glorify Him in all that you do.

We will never be able to fully repay God for the great gift He has given us, but what we can do is respond with a life of worship and gratitude toward Him, in which we strive to live every moment, every second for His glory and for His plans. His plans are far greater than we can know. I want to encourage you to take some time right now to thank God for the great gift we have in Him and ask Him to help you surrender to His glory today.

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.” Colossians 3:17

DEVOTION 3

ARE YOU A WILTED FLOWER?

KATIE PETTIBONE

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Romans 12:1

Imagine if a tulip was gifted with free will and allowed to do whatever it desired to do. The tulip could decide when it was time to eat, sleep, wake up, and how to spend its day. The tulip could also make decisions based on how it felt that morning. For instance, if it woke up groggy, it could easily roll over and go back to sleep. Soon, the tulip may fall into a rhythm of staying in bed every day without even realizing it. If the tulip is not careful, it will begin to wilt because of its lack of sunlight. Without the proper discipline and discernment, the tulip could get really sick and quite possibly die.

Or, it could go another way. If the tulip knows what is best for itself and has the discipline to get out of bed every morning, spend time with the Sun, and properly get the nourishment that it needs, then it will transform into its best self. The tulip has the knowledge and the heart to know that it cannot go on alone, it has to rely on the Sun in order to survive.

If you have not realized already, we are all the tulip, and unlike a real tulip, we have all been gifted with free will. It is an amazing gift to have, but it is a scary one, too. In this life, we need to remember that we were not made for our selfish intentions or desires, but rather, we were created with a purpose. We have to be so careful with how we spend our time in this world because how we spend our time will reflect the actions of our hearts. If we are to be ***“a living sacrifice”*** to the Lord, then we need to make sure we are on the right path. It needs to be the path that leads us to the Lord and not to our own

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selfish desires. It is the path that leads to His needs and not our own. Jesus says there are two roads to follow, and He warns us about the one that leads to destruction.

Matthew 7:13-14 says, ***“Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.”***

We have been gifted with a warning which gives us the wisdom to discern our paths. So, today, you need to evaluate yourself. Do you find yourself on the narrow or wide road? Are you beginning to wilt? You need to identify the things you have put before the Lord and offer them up as a sacrifice to Him. Start looking at the way you think, act, behave, and treat others. Are you God-honoring or self-honoring?

If you do not know how to properly evaluate yourself, the Bible tells us to run to God. Psalm 139:23-24 is a verse I always run to when I want to make sure I do not fall. It says, ***“Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!”*** Ask the Lord to help you see what you need to see, and He will make it clear to you. Lean on Him in everything. Remember that you are to be a living sacrifice for Him. Always put Him first and never yourself. Do not become a wilted flower. Lean on Him today.

DEVOTION 4

WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Romans 12:2

One of my favorite phrases is: think about what you are thinking about. I appreciate the simplicity and depth it entails. The more we evaluate what consumes us, the better we will be able to move away from worldly thoughts. We are to be in the world, but not of it. The first step in doing this is to critique our thought life. Are we consumed with money, work, sports, music, gaming, or a person? Who or what is controlling our minds?

Paul talks about being transformed ***“by the renewal of your mind.”*** As believers, 2 Corinthians 5:17 tells us that we become new people, ***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.”*** Our spiritual self should affect our mental track, too. This can help us to avoid being too prideful, lacking confidence, and having low self-esteem. It starts by evaluating who we allow to come into our minds and pull up a chair. Who is speaking into our lives? It needs to be God through His Word, Christian music, and godly friends.

This ***“renewal of your mind”*** can also help in the area of anxiety. We know we can have peace with God through Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1), but there is also the peace of God. Vance Havner wrote, “Not everyone who has made peace with God has realized the peace of God.” Philippians 4:4-7 says, ***“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious***

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about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Please notice some of the keywords leading up to ***"peace of God."*** They are activities of rejoicing, praying, and giving thanks. These are intentional disciplines that should fill our minds and flow out of our mouths from our hearts.

Studies out of Duke University and the University of California at Berkeley found that the part of the brain that affects stress is the same part that processes thankfulness and blessings. It cannot do both at the same time. This does not mean no one will ever need medication, but for a lot of our anxiety and depression, we can take action. By being thankful in praising God, we transform our minds into a better place.

Take some time today to praise our Almighty Father. Write out some of the things you are thankful for. Start a praise journal. Encourage others and watch the world around you change as the world within you becomes renewed.

DEVOTION 5

MY MIND IS MADE UP

KATRINA YOUNG

“My mind is made up!” I heard those words from my grandma so many times growing up. She set the standard for how to end negotiations with us. Grandma was a petite, very kind-hearted, loving person who had an authoritative stance when saying, “No!” She did not pause to think about what the request or plea was. She was wise and had already discerned what was going to be asked, and then she very confidently took her stance. We always thought she had superpowers because she somehow knew what we were up to before we asked. I am certain her skills were sharpened by the challenges over time with her own kids, but we all knew as grandchildren that she would not be swayed. Her example is tried and true when dealing with children. As Christians, we are to prepare our minds with the things of God so that we can develop the same ability to deal with the things of this world.

Our minds are complex within each one of us. It is the base of our reasoning, thinking, decision-making, and how we view life. It is often referred to as the battleground, where we war with our emotions and decision-making. It is our minds that the world most wants to influence and control, and it is our minds that the Word tells us the Lord wants to renew. Romans 12:2 says, ***“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”***

Our daily walk is a battle. We are exposed to all the negatives of day-to-day living and everything the world throws at us. The Word tells us to continually renew our minds so that we can stand firm when tested. To do that, we have to be in the Word and think about the things of the Lord. Philippians 4:8 tells us, ***“Finally, brothers,***

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whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."

I think about my grandma often, but especially when I am dealing with my own personal battles. Her example of standing firm without wavering is how we, as Christians, should approach every day. Jen Wilkin made a great observation, "We will not wake up ten years from now and find we have passively taken on the character of God." We need to prepare ourselves by being in the Word, which prepares us to see through what is being thrown at us and to discern what is good and what is harmful. We should be able to say, "My mind is made up," with what is good, acceptable, and perfect. That can be our response when the fiery darts are thrown our way. It is training our minds to filter what is of the world and what is of God.

DEVOTION 6
**TAKE CAPTIVE EVERY
THOUGHT**

JILL OSMON

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Romans 12:2

When we look at Romans 12:2, God has given us guidance on discerning His will for our lives. He commands us to not be conformed to this world. The world can mean many different things, but in this context, what Paul means or is referring to is a culture of values that prioritize things like materialism, selfishness, worldly success, and things that are in contrast to the things of God. Being conformed to the world means adapting or being shaped by the things of this world.

Paul not only instructs us to avoid being conformed to the world, but he also calls us to be transformed, and he explains how: through the renewal of our minds. What exactly does this mean? To understand how to transform and renew our minds, we can look to the Bible for guidance.

In 2 Corinthians 10:5 (NIV), we read, ***“We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.”***

We tear down anything that ***“sets itself up against the knowledge of God.”*** If we are honest with ourselves, we know the things that are against the knowledge of God. We know idolatry, rebellion,

deception, pride, hate, and self-reliance are in direct conflict with God's plans and character. So, when Paul talks about transforming our minds, we are to demolish these things in our lives. How do we do it? The answer is to take our thoughts captive, which allows us to renew our minds.

Renewing our minds involves replacing worldly patterns of thinking with Christ-centered thinking. As we meditate on Scripture, reflect on God's nature, and seek His will in prayer, our minds are gradually renewed and aligned with God's truth. For example, if your mind tends to dwell on worry or anxiety, taking your thoughts captive means deliberately focusing on Scripture that encourages our trust in God, such as Philippians 4:6 (NIV), ***“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”***

It also involves focusing on what is pure and holy. In Colossians 3:2, Paul instructs us to ***“Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.”*** This involves disciplining ourselves to focus on thoughts that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, and commendable (Philippians 4:8). We actively choose to think about what is godly, virtuous, and eternal, rather than being preoccupied with fleeting or harmful thoughts.

To ***“take captive every thought”*** means to actively control and direct our thinking, making sure that it aligns with the truth of God's Word. It is a conscious effort to reject thoughts that oppose God's truth and to replace them with thoughts that are in obedience to Christ. This involves self-discipline, prayer, and studying and meditating on Scripture. It is part of the ongoing process of renewing our minds so that we can think and live in a way that honors God.

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Lesson 8

Romans 12:3-8

TEAMWORK MAKES THE DREAM WORK

Pastor Philip Piasecki

I have always loved sports. The only thing better than watching sports is playing sports. Team sports like basketball, baseball, and soccer had a huge impact on my life when I was growing up. There was nothing better than playing together on a team where everybody understood their role and really embraced it. On my varsity basketball team, I knew my job was to bring high energy, rebound, play good defense, and make my layups when I grabbed an offensive rebound. Sure, I had a few high-scoring games, but that was not my primary position, and I still absolutely loved it. Our entire team embraced their role, and we made it further in the playoffs than any team still ever has at that school. We thrived together because of how we used our gifts to work together. As the saying goes, “Teamwork makes the dream work.” I have also been on teams where every kid thought they were Michael Jordan and they should be the one shooting the ball fifty times a game. I think it goes without saying, those teams were much less successful.

1. Did you play team sports growing up? What are some biblical examples you can think of from those experiences?

Romans 12:3-8 says, ***“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”***

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In the same way that a team works better together, when everyone acts in humility toward one another, understands their proper role, and functions in that role, so does the body of Christ. God has given each and every one of us a spiritual gift, and it is our responsibility to use that gift in humility to bless God and to bless others. These verses are packed with spiritual guidance on how we, as believers, are to interact with one another in relation to the spiritual gifts that we have been given.

2. What are some spiritual gifts you see Paul list in these Scriptures?

3. What is your current understanding of what each of these spiritual gifts means practically?

Each believer has been given a spiritual gift by God. We must identify our gift and do our best to steward that gift. This is not an exhaustive list of spiritual gifts in Romans chapter 12; we see spiritual gifts also listed in Ephesians chapter 4 and 1 Corinthians chapter 12. Based on Romans 1:11-2, John Piper has a great definition of what a spiritual gift is, "A spiritual gift is an ability given by the Holy Spirit to express our faith effectively for the upbuilding of another's faith." I would encourage you to take a spiritual gift assessment online and even seek out a pastor to help you identify what your spiritual gift(s) might be. We could easily teach a whole lesson about each spiritual gift, but this was not Paul's aim in this Scripture. For our purposes, the important thing to know is that God has given each believer a spiritual gift, and there is an expectation that you would use your gift for the glory of God and the building of His Church.

4. In Romans 12:3, why do you think the first thing Paul says is ***“not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think”*** when addressing spiritual gifts?

Pride has been an issue since the beginning of time. Lucifer (Satan) was originally an angel until his pride caused him to think that he was greater than God, and this led to him being cast out of Heaven. I am sure that throughout the churches that Paul ministered to, he saw endless examples of believers becoming prideful because of the spiritual gifts that God had given them. I can say from personal experience that I have seen many people do an immense amount of damage to themselves and the believers around them because of their pride in their spiritual gifts. So, Paul exhorts the Roman church to humble themselves toward one another in using their spiritual gifts.

5. How can we practice humility in our interactions with other believers while still valuing our own God-given gifts?

John 13:12-15 says, ***“When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, ‘Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.’”***

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6. What is your first reaction to reading about Jesus washing the disciples' feet?

First, we need to look at the example of humility that Christ Himself gives to us in Scripture. The job of washing people's feet as they entered into a home or before they ate their meal would have been reserved for a servant. Yet, here we see Jesus willingly humbling Himself to wash the disciples' feet. This would have been a disgusting task, yet Jesus did it willingly. The more we conform to the image of Christ in our lives, the more we should be looking to serve others with the gifts that the Lord has given us.

7. How does Jesus' example of serving others inform how we should use our spiritual gifts and interact with the church community?

Philippians 2:3-4 adds, ***“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.”***

8. How can we avoid comparing our gifts or roles to others and instead focus on faithfully using what God has entrusted to us?

We have all been given different gifts, and they are all essential for the Church to be as effective as Jesus wants it to be. We have to

believe that there are no insignificant gifts in the Kingdom of God. The one who is gifted in mercy and generosity towards the needy is just as valuable to the Kingdom as the one who is gifted to teach and preach. However, instead of us all working together in harmony, our sinful nature tries to stir up selfish ambition and conceit in us, causing us to not be impactful for the cause of Christ. Satan's goal is not just for you not to be part of the team; he is satisfied with you being ineffective on the sidelines. Our pride can do this to us in many ways:

- “I cannot be involved in that ministry, they do not know what they are doing and they will not let me be in charge.”
- “I cannot submit to that ministry leader, they do not have the giftings that I clearly have.”
- “I do not have any spiritual gifts, God cannot use me.”

These are just a few examples of how our pride can keep us from using our spiritual gifts to glorify God and build up His Church.

9. Verse 6 reminds us that we have gifts according to the grace given to us. How does understanding that our gifts are a result of God's grace shape the way we use them?

When we realize that every spiritual gift we have, and even the faith that it takes to use those gifts, all come from God, we are left with nothing to boast about. Understanding that it is God's grace that has given these things to us should encourage us to use them humbly. I am personally nothing without Christ; I am incapable of teaching or preaching His Word without the moving of the Holy Spirit in my life. My prayer for my own life is that I will never look at the spiritual gifts that God has given me and believe that it makes me any better than any other believer. My desire for our church is that it is filled with

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faith-filled people who humbly use their spiritual gifts and encourage others to do the same.

10. How can we encourage others to identify and use their spiritual gifts, especially those who may feel unsure or unqualified?

In 1 Corinthians 12:21-22, Paul says, ***“The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”***

If there are those who are struggling with the idea of having a spiritual gift or struggling to think of their giftings as important, we need to remind them of what Scripture teaches us, ***“The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.”*** We cannot be the Church that we are supposed to be unless we are all humbly being effective in our God-given roles. The more we become like Jesus and the more we rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, the more effective we can be together. Your personal spiritual giftings are valuable, and I hope you take the privilege to be used by God to do incredible things for His Kingdom.

NOTES

DEVOTION 1 ALL ABOUT HIM

CATHY STORY

Have you ever found that finding humility in your life is a struggle? Maybe for you, this is not an area where you feel you have a difficult time, or maybe you feel that you do. Wherever you stand regarding feelings of humility and pride, Romans 12:3 provides a great reminder for how we are to reflect the Lord.

Romans 12:3 writes ***“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”*** This verse is not calling us to degrade ourselves or to not see the beauty in who God has made us. However, it does call us to have a humble heart and mind in how we view ourselves.

Have you ever found yourself thinking, “No one can do this as well as me,” or maybe, “I do not think this would even get done if I were not here!” These are just two common thoughts and feelings that can creep into our minds. God has blessed each of us with different skills, talents, and abilities, and we are called to use and reflect those for the glory of God. Ephesians 5:1 reminds us, ***“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.”*** We are called to imitate Christ not just in our words but through how we live our lives.

It is important that we use a truthful lens when viewing ourselves. We need to recognize the gifts and talents we have been given by God but not allow that to turn into thinking they are gifts and talents of our own accord. We must pray that we continue to see the grace and mercy that God has given to us and the privilege of being a light for His name in this world. When we allow the I-centric view to become our center focus, we can lose sight of the true reason

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we are able to do anything! When we focus on the I, we start to be concerned with how others may perceive us or the message we are called to share. We may be tempted to live differently to appease others' thoughts about us.

Spend time seeking the Lord today. Ask Him to allow your heart and life to be focused on reflecting who He has called you to be and how He has called you to live.

DEVOTION 2

JUDGMENT

KARSEN THEEDE

As humans, our judgment is a crucial tool in our lives. When the alarm clock goes off in the morning, we use our judgment to decide whether or not to hit the snooze button. We use our judgment to decide what to wear and we use our judgment to decide if caffeine is needed for the day. Then we get to our cars, and our judgment plays a major role in our driving. It is then that we judge whether or not we need to go just a little bit over the speed limit when we see our ETA, and we use our judgment to decide if it is safe to change lanes. I could keep going on and on with different examples of how judgment is something we use every day. However, judgment is not just used for situations. We also use our judgment toward other people. Every day, whether we mean to or not, we judge other people, but as Christians, we have a responsibility relating to our judgment.

Romans 12:3 states, ***“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”***

This responsibility I brought up earlier relates directly to how we judge others. Verse 3 starts off by reminding us that none of us are better than the other. We all live in a broken world, and all of us deal with the repercussions of sin. Because of that, in the eyes of the Lord, we are all on a level playing field of sorts. All sin is evil in the eyes of the Lord, and not one of us is more sinful than another. As Christians, we have accepted the gift of forgiveness for our sins. So, in the eyes of the Lord, we have been forgiven and saved from His judgment.

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This is where we could be tempted to look at others who have not accepted Christ into their lives and cast our judgment on them for their choices, beliefs, and actions. We need to remember that we were right there with them before we accepted Christ, our sins are equal to theirs in the eyes of the Lord. Our duty as Christians is not to cast judgment on the person, but to help lead them to Christ as we have come to Him. Our faith in God is the only thing that saves us, and it is the only thing that can save others.

DEVOTION 3 BETTER THAN TEAM WORK

JOANNA MONTGOMERY

Many of us have worked as part of a team. Ideally, everyone on a team fulfills a role resulting in a successful project. It is wonderful to have a team work together to complete a great project on time. In reality, however, being on a team can be horrible if members will not listen to ideas, do not show up, will not participate, or complain about the job they have to do. As a Christian, we have something even better than a team.

When we choose Christ as the Lord of our lives, we do more than join His team. Romans 12:4-5 says, ***“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”*** Paul says we become a member of the body of Christ. On a team, I have disagreed with other team members; however, in my body, my right hand has never disagreed with my left hand about how to hold something.

I have hand tremors, and when my right hand starts to shake and I am about to spill my coffee, my left hand immediately helps hold the cup steady, and my feet stop walking until we get everything under control. Then my brain suggests a lid for the cup to keep the coffee from shaking out.

I cannot imagine if my right hand started shaking and my left hand pretended not to notice and did not reach out to help. I can tell you right now that my tastebuds would be angry with my left hand for not helping save the coffee from dumping out of the cup onto the floor. My brain would express scathing thoughts about the inept appendage at the end of my left arm, and every member of my body would be upset at having to put down the coffee, change my clothes,

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and find a mop! In reality, each member of our body responds and reacts to provide us with what we need, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unconsciously.

In Romans 12:4-5, Paul uses the human body to demonstrate how we should participate as part of the Church, also known as the body of Christ. Just as our body works to ensure we are taken care of, we should work to make sure the body of Christ is taken care of. We do not ignore the other members or try to do our own thing. We all work together to bring a healthy life to the body of Christ. If I am a left hand, and I see the right hand shaking, without thinking about how it might inconvenience me, I jump in and support the right hand so the job we are all working toward will be successfully accomplished.

Each of us has been uniquely created by God to serve a purpose. As part of the body, we should look at what the Lord is doing and eagerly help. My left hand never asks my right hand if it would be okay to help hold the cup. My left hand never just hangs there, waiting to be asked to help, and then gets angry because no one bothered to notice it was there. Instead, the left hand sees a need (the shaking coffee cup) and immediately takes action. Sometimes, the coffee spills anyway, but my right hand never condemns my left hand and says, "Hey, Lefty, if I need your help, I will ask!"

As a part of the body of Christ, each person is uniquely gifted to do the will of Christ in a certain way. Some of us will see babies that need to be cared for in the nursery, and we should do what is required to serve in that ministry. Some of us will notice the students need a bus driver to get to an event to help them grow. Some of us will see the weeds or the landscaping that needs to be cared for. We should not wait around expecting to be asked to serve. We should reach out, ask someone if we have any questions, and gladly do what must be done.

Trust me, I do not see all the work needed in the body of Christ. That is because God created knees, eyes, elbows, and all types of

different members to serve in many different ways. The knee will never listen intently to a conversation. God did not create the knee to listen. The knee is created for a different purpose. If each member serves to further the Gospel of Christ and does not wait to be asked, try to be something they are not, or get angry because someone asks them to do something they do not want to do, the entire body will be able to accomplish Christ's command to further the Gospel. Our body works together so we can live and function in the world. The body of Christ, likewise, should work together to demonstrate Christ to a lost world.

DEVOTION 4

“E PLURIBUS UNUM”

ZACH HONNEN

The Latin phrase “E pluribus unum” means “out of many, one.” This phrase originated as a motto of the United States and reflects the idea of unity among diversity, particularly the union of the original thirteen colonies to form one nation. The phrase was first suggested in 1776 for the design of the Great Seal of the United States and was officially adopted in 1782. It symbolizes the blending of different peoples, cultures, and states into a cohesive whole, embodying the spirit of cooperation and unity that underpins the American identity. Though not the official motto (“In God We Trust”), it remains an important and enduring symbol of national unity and can still be found on the State of Michigan flag. In our passage today, Paul focuses on a very similar unity.

Romans 12:4-5 says, ***“For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.”***

In the body of Christ, in the church, we have many members, and we do not all have the same function. At the beginning of the American idea, there was disunity because of the differences between the 13 colonies. However, the phrase “out of many, one,” I believe, comes from the same realization and understanding that Paul had, that we do not all have the same functions. We all have strengths and weaknesses, but together, we can form one unit that functions and produces life. The diversity and differences between the 13 colonies back then and overall the 50 states today have yielded strength and prosperity. In the same way, the church, though we are full of people with different abilities, functions, and gifts, is all one body in Christ. For me to slander or hurt my neighbor would be to slander or hurt my own body.

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This unity and diversity are what make the church strong. America has risen, and one day America will fall, but God's church will endure forever. So, my questions for us today are:

1. Do we recognize our different functions?
2. Are we walking and living in those functions?
3. Do we also recognize that though we have different functions, we are all members of one body in Christ and one another?

In our churches and communities, there should be no jealousy, pride-based competition, or bitterness between brothers and sisters because we are all members of one another. When our brother succeeds, we succeed; when our sister succeeds, we succeed.

Charles Spurgeon said, "We are all members one of another. No Christian can isolate himself without loss to himself and injury to others. The welfare of one affects the rest, for the church is one body in Christ."

DEVOTION 5 PUNCH IN THE GUT

LORENA NORRIS

“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.” Romans 12:6-8

The Apostle Paul, in Romans 12:6-8, reminds us of the diversity of gifts God has given His people. These gifts are not for our glory but for improving the church and strengthening relationships among believers. I appreciate the direction given, ***“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”*** This calls us to embrace our unique roles in the body of Christ and actively engage with the community of believers He has placed around us.

Friendships within the body of Christ are more than social connections; they are vital for our spiritual growth. The people we surround ourselves with have a profound impact on our faith walk. When we intentionally nourish these relationships, God often uses them to bless, encourage, and guide us in ways we might not immediately recognize. Many times, I have experienced God’s hand through the loving actions of a friend in Christ. Whether it was a timely message, a prayer during a challenging season, or a word of encouragement that spoke directly to my heart, the Holy Spirit has ministered to me through them. These moments are orchestrated by God and show His care for us through His church.

However, like all relationships, it takes work and commitment to follow Jesus’ example. Sometimes, the words of Jesus feel gentle and soothing. Other times, if we are being honest, they feel like a

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swift punch to the gut. God, in His love, does not shy away from telling us the truth we need to hear, even if it stings. In the same way, friends in Christ should love us enough to call us out on blind spots and have tough, vulnerable conversations. I have had friends look me in the eye and say things I did not want to hear but desperately needed to.

God also calls us to flourish in our gifts and be willing vessels of His love in others' lives. When we serve, teach, exhort, and give cheerfully, we reflect His character and build up His church. By being obedient and available, we allow God to use us as instruments of His grace.

Let this be an invitation to lean deeper into your church family. Invest in relationships with other believers. Encourage, serve, and walk alongside them. In doing so, you not only grow in faith but also create an environment where God's love moves and His purposes are fulfilled.

Ask yourself: How can I use the gifts God has given me? Who in my church family can I encourage this week? Let us nurture the friendships God has given us and obey His call to be His hands and feet, even if it means delivering or receiving a holy gut check along the way.

DEVOTION 6

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE GIFT?

JOSH THAYER

Today, we are going to talk about one of my favorite topics: how we work together as the body of Christ. In Romans 12:6-8, Paul gives us some great insight into how God has wired each of us to contribute to the church in unique and meaningful ways.

Romans 12:6-8 says, ***“Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.”***

First, notice what Paul emphasizes: we all have gifts. It is not just some of us, but all of us. If you are a part of the body of Christ, God has given you specific gifts. They might look different from someone else's, but that is the beauty of it. God did not make us all the same on purpose. The church is strongest when everyone plays their part.

Paul gives a list of examples: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation (encouragement), generosity, leadership, and mercy. While it is not an exhaustive list, it shows the variety of ways we can contribute. Maybe you are someone who loves encouraging others. Paul says, go for it! Maybe you have a knack for serving quietly in the background. That is just as important as teaching or leading. The point is, whatever your gift, do not let it sit unused.

Another key thing here is Paul's emphasis on how we use our gifts. He says, ***“let us use them.”*** That is a call to action. If you have

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been holding back, thinking, “Well, someone else will handle it,” this is your reminder that God gave you your gift for a reason. He wants you to step into it.

Do not miss the attitude Paul encourages:

- Lead with zeal—be passionate and wholehearted.
- Serve with generosity—do not hold back.
- Show mercy with cheerfulness—let others see God’s joy in you.

When we bring our gifts to the table, we are not just helping others; we are reflecting God’s heart. The church is a picture of unity in diversity. It is a group of people with different strengths coming together to show the world what God’s love looks like.

So, here is my challenge for you: What gifts has God given you, and how can you use them to serve the church? Whether it is big, small, up front, or behind the scenes, your role matters. Together we make up the body of Christ. Every part is vital.

Let us commit to using our gifts with joy and purpose for His glory and the good of His people.

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Lesson 9

Romans 12:9-21

REAL LOVE

Pastor Keaton Washburn

1. What are you known for? When your name comes up, what are some things that people say about you? Are those things positive or negative?

Following an examination of spiritual gifts, Paul writes about the characteristics that should be cultivated and lived out in all believers. He begins with the foundation of all the rest of the attributes by saying in Romans 12:9, “**Let love be genuine.**” This is the basis for the rest of the chapter. All the actions that follow are built upon love being genuine. Without real love, the rest of the list is impossible to fulfill.

A couple of years ago around Christmas, my brother saw an ad for a North Face jacket that his now fiancée had been wanting. Instead of the \$150 it usually retailed for, this site was supposedly selling it for about \$15. My brother knew it was sketchy but decided to take the risk. About a month later, the package showed up from the sketchy website. It was way too small to be a jacket, and when he opened it up, it only contained a pair of cheap socks. He was scammed. The ad looked good, but it ended up being too good to be true. I am not sure how businesses get away with things like this, but my brother learned a valuable lesson that day: do not believe everything you see on the internet. There are people out there whose intentions are dishonest.

2. When was a time that you got scammed? How did it make you feel?

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3. When have you experienced genuine love from someone? How did it make you feel?

Read Romans 12:9-13.

Paul lists a handful of virtues here: love, hating evil, clinging to good, brotherly love, honor, zeal, fervency in spirit, service, joy, patience, prayerful dependence, generosity, and hospitality. Each of these is built on love, but also on what Paul said earlier in Romans 12:3, ***“I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly that he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”***

When I was in college, I needed this reminder constantly. God made it clear that I was full of myself and cared little for those around me. I took this verse, printed out multiple copies of it in a large, bold font, and plastered them around my dorm room. I had it taped on the wall next to my bed and another copy on the back door or the door to our room so I would see it every time I left the room. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis gave a picture of a humble Christian, “Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call ‘humble’ nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him. If you do dislike him it will be because you feel a little envious of anyone who seems to enjoy life so easily. He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.” He continues, “If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.”

4. What does it take to view yourself correctly? How does someone know that they think of themselves more highly than they ought to?

5. Who comes to mind when you think of humble people in your life? What makes them humble?

Each of these virtues is demonstrated to us by the living example that God the Father sent for us; His name is Jesus.

6. How do we see Jesus expressing love throughout Scripture? How do we see Jesus' patience? How do we see His prayerful dependence or patience in tribulation?

7. How can a Christian follow Jesus' example in these traits?

Paul does not give these words to Christians because he wants believers to be nice people for the sake of it. Rather, these virtues are such a big deal because we are to be conformed into the image of Christ. This process is theologically called sanctification. The New Hampshire Baptist Confession defines sanctification in Article X, "We believe that Sanctification is the process by which, according to the will of God, we are made partakers of his holiness; that it is

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a progressive work; that it is begun in regeneration; and that it is carried on in the hearts of believers by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the Sealer and Comforter, in the continual use of the appointed means - especially the Word of God, self-examination, self-denial, watchfulness, and prayer."

8. What stands out to you about that definition of sanctification?
How have you been sanctified since your moment of conversion?

Sanctification of the Christian begins in the quiet moments with the Lord in His Word and prayer. God chisels away at the sinful parts of us in the stillness of time with Him. However, the process does not end there. Sanctification is lived out in the community, in our relationships, workplaces, schools, and family.

Read Romans 12:14-21.

There is much that can be said about this section, and I encourage you to take it phrase by phrase on your own this week and examine yourself before the Lord. Ask Him, as the Psalmist did in Psalm 139:23-24, ***"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"***

NOTES

DEVOTION 1

LOVE IS ALSO A VERB

LORENA NORRIS

The word “love” is one of the most useless words in the English language. I love pizza. I also love my husband. The word “love” is often used loosely. We say we love food, hobbies, and entertainment, but the love the Bible speaks of is much deeper. In Matthew 22:36-39, Jesus tells us that the greatest commandments are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This love is not about feelings; it is about action.

Our relationship with Christ is built on the greatest act of love. Jesus laid down His life for our sins. His love is not about comfort or convenience but about sacrifice. He loved us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:8), undeserving of His grace, yet He chose to give Himself up for us. This is the kind of love we are called to show.

Romans 12:9 says, ***“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.”*** To abhor something means to regard it with disgust and hatred. As followers of Christ, we are called to hate sin, injustice, and anything that opposes God’s righteousness. This is not a passive dislike but an active rejection of evil. At the same time, we are to cling to what is good. We are to embrace truth, kindness, integrity, and godliness in every aspect of our lives. Practically, this means filling our minds with God’s Word, surrounding ourselves with godly influences, and actively choosing to act in ways that reflect Christ’s love and righteousness.

Genuine love often means we are giving up something and expecting nothing in return. It calls us to serve without seeking recognition, to forgive even when it is hard, and to give selflessly. It is easy to love those who are kind and lovable, but true love extends even to those who are difficult, broken, or undeserving. It is a choice to reflect

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Christ's love in the way we interact with others daily. Jesus did not love us because we were worthy. He loved us in our unworthiness and made us whole through His sacrifice.

This kind of love is not always easy, but it is what we are called to as followers of Christ. It is an outpouring of His presence in us, a reflection of His grace and mercy. Genuine love is the mark of a transformed life. May we strive to live with a heart that says, "Less of me, more of Him."

DEVOTION 2

HONOR COMPETITION

PASTOR JOSHUA YATES

“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.” Romans 12:10

I am a competitor. I have a competitive spirit within me. If I am going to play a game with you, I am in it to win it. It can be anything like ping pong, Euchre (this California boy has learned to play), Phase 10, basketball, relay games, miniature and real golf, bobbing for apples, or wrapping someone up with toilet paper to look like a mummy. If I am playing a game, I am playing to beat you. I always told my girls that when they finally beat me, if they do, they will earn it. Seriously, I never let them win in Candy Land or Chutes and Ladders. I am in it to win it!

This can be a good thing and a bad thing. It is a blessing and a curse. This has helped me to be a driven person in life and accomplish some hard things, but it can also lead me to despair when I feel like I am not winning or when I fail. It can also lead to some hurt feelings when my competitive spirit gets the best of me and I forget I am the adult. It is not always about winning and losing.

Paul has now shifted his writing to the Romans, focusing on how Jesus' followers should respond to the great salvation that Jesus gives us. He has spent eleven previous chapters of this letter telling all of the great things that God has done and how salvation from God works. He calls us to offer our lives as living sacrifices to God, to worship Him, and to give all of ourselves to Him.

Now, we are called to love each other and to be devoted to it. We are to outdo each other in honoring the other person. Basically, we are called to compete with each other in how we give honor to each

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other in the body of Christ. If two people get to the front door of the church, each person continually stands there saying, “No, after you.” “No! After you!” and no one gets to actually go in the building! Okay, maybe it is not that serious of a competition, but you get the idea.

Jesus told us how the world around us would know that we are His disciples in John 13:35, ***“By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”***

The world around us is shaking. I write this devotion as my home state of California is on fire, and thousands are losing their homes. Often, the first thing that is heard from Christians is that God is judging Hollywood. Seriously? People are losing relationships over the smallest things. Families are being torn apart over political differences.

Tell me, does the world around us see that we are following Jesus in how we love each other in the body of Christ? There is no way that we can love people around us if we cannot love each other well. Loving each other the way God has called us to could very well be the thing that helps people actually see Jesus.

The world around us is hurting. There are people sitting next to us every Sunday that are in pain. Will you reach out and love that person with the love that God has shown you? Will you honor that person with your time, presence, and care? Will you seek to love others first rather than only seeking to get your own needs met? Will you love your neighbor as yourself?

Let us all be in it to win it by loving each other well.

DEVOTION 3

OVERFLOWING TOWARD OTHERS

PASTOR CHUCK LINDSEY

“Not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality.” Romans 12:11-13 (NKJV)

Romans 12:11 really begins in verse 10 with the words, ***“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love.”*** What follows is some of the ways we, as His people, can love ***“one another.”*** The first words of verse 11 are in the negative. We are told what not to do. The words ***“not lagging in diligence”*** in modern terms would be, “Do not be lazy about this!” The command is against indifference and lethargy towards the needs of others. As His people, we are to be the opposite of lazy and indifferent towards the Lord and others, especially towards the needs of others.

We are, instead, to be ***“fervent in spirit.”*** These are words that mean we are looking for ways to bless our King and help others. The word ***“fervent”*** means “to boil over or bubble over,” and it describes what happens when we put heat to water. The heat causes the water to stir and boil and finally bubble over. This translates this way: as the love of the Lord affects us, it stirs us and moves us into action towards Him and others. His love and kindness towards us is the flame that sets the hearts of His people to boil. We become fervent in our love for Him and for others because of His love for us.

This is why the next words are ***“serving the Lord.”*** This fervent overflow is the only way to serve the Lord. It means to serve Him as a response to His goodness, kindness, and love towards us. This

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will push us to be ***“rejoicing in hope”*** that we have in Him. His love for us will make us ***“patient in tribulation”*** (extremely difficult). His kindness and grace toward us make us steadfast in prayer. As He has so deeply met our needs, we overflow by ***“distributing to the needs of the saints.”***

If we are lacking in these things, may we take a step back and look at what Jesus Christ did on the cross for us. We must let His love for us deeply affect us; then, we will overflow to others. Then we serve. Then we give. Then we help. Then we Reach, Gather, and Grow.

DEVOTION 4 OUT OF PLACE?

JILL OSMON

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” Romans 12:14, 17

Persecution can take on many forms. We often expect it to be loud and overt, but sometimes it is quiet, subtle, and just as harmful. Paul addresses persecution in Romans, but the Bible is full of guidance on what to expect and how to respond.

Persecution should not be a surprise to us. In 1 Peter 4:12–14, we read, ***“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”***

I do not know about you, but I certainly do not feel ***“blessed”*** when I encounter hostility toward the things of God. Yet, when I look back on those moments, I can clearly see how God’s presence was unmistakably with me. That is a true blessing, to know that the very presence of God is resting within us. What greater response could we ask for from Him than to experience and feel His nearness in those difficult times?

Jesus talks about this in John 15:19–20, ***“If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: ‘A servant is***

not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they keep my word, they will also keep yours.”

We face persecution because we do not truly belong here. Have you ever found yourself in a place where you felt out of place? It is like accidentally walking into the wrong public restroom. That would be so embarrassing, right? It is at that moment when you realize, “This is not where I should be.” It is no surprise that others notice and react. Similarly, we do not belong in this world, and that should be obvious. Our lives should stand out as noticeably different from the world around us. The world’s reaction to us is simply a reflection of what they are missing. Our lives should mirror the very thing we long for but cannot quite grasp.

So, how should we respond? If we look at Matthew 5:43-47, we see, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”***

We are called to love because, once again, we are not of this world, and our response should reflect God’s character. This response will provoke different reactions. Some will be drawn to the Gospel, while others may react with fear or even hatred. Yet, in Matthew, it is clear that God commands us to respond with love. He points to tax collectors, a despised group at the time, and says that even they love those who love them. However, if all we do is love those who love us back, how are we truly set apart? How are we reflecting God’s love, goodness, and, ultimately, the Gospel? True love goes

beyond the easy, and it is through that love that we show the world something radically different.

Let us look at 2 Corinthians 12:9–10, ***“But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”***

There are times when we feel defeated and weary by the world's rejection of the Gospel, our faith, and our pursuit of holiness. Yet, God reassures us that His grace is more than enough for us. In the face of persecution, insults, or hardship, we can find contentment because when we rely on His strength and protection, we will endure.

As the world grows increasingly distant from the things of God, we are reminded of what we can hold fast to. Scripture offers us this truth. Psalm 27:1-2 says, ***“The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”*** So, do not fear. Our refuge is in the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He is our unwavering stronghold!

DEVOTION 5 TOGETHER

DEBBIE GABBARA

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Romans 12:15

Every Friday morning, I have the joy of studying God's Word with a room full of incredible ladies. Our Growth Community has grown over the past few years and blossomed to be a wonderful group that loves to dig into God's Word. We have also come to enjoy spending time together outside of our class. We share meals together, celebrate each other, sew together, shop together, and go to the movies together. We share our burdens and concerns and rejoice in the exciting and awesome things God is doing in our lives and in the hearts and lives of the ones we love. In other words, we have become friends, sisters in Christ who love and care for one another. When someone has a challenging circumstance, these ladies are there for each other! We have a couple of different text threads, and when there is a problem or a praise, the prayers get started, and messages of empathy or hope are shared to encourage and strengthen each other. I love being a part of this caring and praying group.

When we ***“rejoice with those who rejoice”*** and ***“weep with those who weep,”*** we fulfill the command to be of the same mind toward one another. Commentator David Guzik says, “It is a simple command to be considerate of the feelings of others instead of waiting for them to be considerate of your feelings.” Jesus showed us how to do this in the Gospels.

In John chapter 2, we see Jesus and His disciples sharing in the happiness and celebration of a wedding. When the wine ran out, Mary, the mother of Jesus, asked Him to help solve the problem for

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their friends. Jesus performed His first miracle and made wine from water. Of course, He made the very best wine that was served at the wedding.

If we continue in the book of John, we find the story of Jesus' sick friend Lazarus. Although He knew that Lazarus would live again, Jesus wept when Lazarus died. He could not help but weep when He saw Lazarus' sisters weeping and so distraught. Jesus loved His friends and was moved by their deep sadness.

Everyday life brings joys and sorrows. Galatians 6:2 (NET) says, ***“Carry one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.”*** The ***“Law of Christ”*** refers to the command that is given in John chapter 15 to love one another. This Law calls us as believers to follow the example of Jesus' compassion. We should rejoice and weep with others. We can put this into practice just as Jesus did by supporting each other.

Is there someone that you can show the love of Jesus to through a call, card, a meal, or maybe just sitting to comfort them in their sorrow? In good times or challenging situations, rejoicing in the Lord is a powerful expression of our faith. Jesus left us so many examples in Scripture to remind us that it is in Him that we find our strength, our source of joy, and our salvation. He calls us to share that Good News with those around us.

DEVOTION 6

THE UPSIDE DOWN LIFE

ZACH HONNEN

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:18–21

In the Christian life, we live in the reality of the upside-down Kingdom. What this means is that there is a reality of principles, commands, and teachings that do not make sense to our modern world or even to the ancient world, for that matter. There are sayings like, ***“So the last will be first, and the first last”*** (Matthew 20:16) or ***“Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it”*** (Matthew 10:39) that can be foreign to us. These sayings and principles oftentimes do not make sense to us, but they make sense to God.

The reality within these sayings is that God has a greater understanding than we do and that our natural instinct or inclination is not always right. Today, we are looking at caring for our enemies. This is something that is strictly against our own nature. Our culture says that when we get hit, we should hit back harder. When we are insulted, insult them right back. Paul is echoing what Jesus says in Matthew 5:43-44: ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”***

Here, we enter an upside-down Kingdom. We, as Christians, are supposed to love those who hate us. We are not only to love them

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in our mind or speech, but in our actions. I do not know about you, but it is pretty hard to love somebody even if they are not my enemy. When a random person is driving too slow or cuts me off in traffic, they are not necessarily my enemy, but in that moment, I definitely do not want to love them. However, the reality is we are called to be different from all other people. We are to be different from all other religions. Oftentimes, other religions command love or care for other people based upon personal salvation, the weighing of the scales so that good deeds outweigh bad. However, the Christian life is different. Within the Christian life, we are called to love because we were first loved (1 John 4:19).

The text does not say that we are to love so that we can be saved or that we are to be peaceable so that we can be saved. Instead, we do it to be an example. We do it to show the love of Christ. Our hope is that the love of Christ will convict others and bring them to a place where they can recognize their need for Jesus (***“heap burning coals on his head”***).

Personal Reflection:

1. Why do you think it is so difficult to love and care for our enemies? Can you recall a time when you struggled with this?
2. How does living in the “upside-down Kingdom” challenge our natural instincts and cultural norms?
3. What are some practical ways you can love someone who has wronged or hurt you this week?
4. How does understanding that ***“we love because He first loved us,”*** (1 John 4:19) change the way you approach loving difficult people?
5. How might loving your enemies serve as a witness to others and reflect the love of Christ in your life?

Take time to consider the answers to these questions. Seek the Lord and ask Him whether you are loving your enemies as well. This is something that we do in the power of Christ, and in the

understanding of what He has done for you and for me. We cannot do this on our own. We cannot do this in our own strength. We must do this out of a place of adoration for Jesus. We must be completely captivated by who He is and what He has done. When a cup is tipped over, whatever is inside comes out. So, if the Lord tips us over and pours us out over our enemies, what will come out? Will it be the love of Jesus, or will it be bitterness, jealousy, contempt, and worldly responses?

The background of the entire page is a light gray marbled pattern, featuring swirling, organic shapes in shades of white, light gray, and pale blue, reminiscent of stone or liquid marbling.

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Lesson 10

Romans 13:1-10

GOD CAN WORK THROUGH ANYONE

Pastor Mitchell Holmes

Some of my favorite movies of all time are films in which a rebellion group has formed and is the last bastion of hope for good in the world against a tyrannical, evil darkness. Films such as “*Star Wars*” and “*Lord of the Rings*” are among my favorites. In them, we see the underdog group fight back against the oppressive evil that threatens to rule over all the land. It is so satisfying to see these rebels win and overthrow the bad guys in the films. I think it is in our nature to desire to rebel, especially against a force that we believe to be wrong or oppressive. It can be a decision by management at work that appears to be predatory, your mortgage company charging more for your home, or a teacher that you feel wrongly punished your child at school.

1. Describe a time in your life when you have felt the desire to stand against something that felt unjust to you.

Please read Romans 13:1-7. We have all felt this desire to push back and fight against these things that have wronged us. In our passage today, Paul addresses what that looks like in the context of government. In his time, the Roman government was an incredibly difficult subject, especially among Jews and Christians. Romans chapter 13:1-2 says, “***Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.***” Paul is speaking to our natural inclination to resist by reminding the believer that all authority is granted by God. All governments, past, present, and future, have been appointed by God. He placed every leader in his seat, and He removed every leader from his seat when the time was right. Even though corruption in government exists, this does not remove the fact that God has appointed the people involved in

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such scandals and evil practices. Paul exhorts Christians to be the best citizens of their government. In verse two, he goes so far as to say that resisting the government that God has ordained is to resist God Himself.

2. Paul asserts that ***“there is no authority except from God”*** in verse 1. What does this teach us about the relationship between God and human governments?

3. In verse 2, Paul talks about resisting authority and receiving judgment. What are the consequences of resisting governing authorities according to these verses?

Now, this compliance with governing authorities does not mean that the believer is expected to have blind obedience. There are times in which disobedience is a duty of the believer. Most specifically, it is when a governing body commands its people to disobey God and disregard His commands.

4. What are some examples that might warrant disobedience to the government?

There are plenty of examples found in Scripture where God's people could not comply with the orders of their government. I personally love the story in Daniel chapter 3, where we see three God-fearing men refuse to bow down to an idol of their king and, as a result, are

thrown in the fiery furnace. If you read this story, you will notice that these men did not mount an insurrection or start a rebellion against the king. They could not comply with the order that they had been given to worship someone or something over God, so they disobeyed. However, when the time came, they accepted the consequences of their actions without complaint. Obedience to the commands of God must always come first, no matter what. This obedience to God may sometimes look like disobedience to government. Disobedience to government will likely have consequences, but as we see in verse four, it is the responsibility of government to dole out justice, ***“For he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.”***

5. Paul writes that the authority ***“does not bear the sword in vain.”*** How does this description relate to the role of government in maintaining justice and order?

This verse shows us that governments have some authority that individuals do not. Specifically, we are being told that the government is given the authority to exact vengeance on an evildoer. That is something that we, as followers of Christ, are told not to do. Personal vengeance is wrong in the sight of the Lord because vengeance is to be exacted through the justice system set up by ruling authorities. Paul tells us in verse three that if we conduct ourselves well, we need not fear the vengeance of our government. Therefore, if we have conducted ourselves well, which might even mean disobedience toward the government in order to obey God, then we have done right in the sight of the Lord and have nothing to fear when or if the consequences come through the justice system.

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6. Verse 4 mentions that the governing authority is **“God’s servant for your good.”** What does this suggest about the role of government in a believer’s life?

7. What does it mean practically to view the government as a servant of God, especially when it may not appear to be acting in accordance with God’s will?

Paul continues in verse five by reminding us that this command is one of conscience, not something that should be done out of fear of the Lord’s wrath. As God’s people, we should be set apart from the world. One area in which we ought to demonstrate this is in our understanding of government as a divine institution that God has ordained. This does not mean that we cannot disagree or work to change things that we see as problematic, but we must be respectful of the office that God has chosen, for He has picked them to be His servants for the people for a time. One way of showing respect, which Paul addresses here specifically, is paying taxes. If we feel that a government or leader is unjustly or wrongfully using funds that they have access to, it can be a natural reaction to want to give less funds to them! However, this is clearly spoken about in God’s Word as something that is unbecoming of a follower of Christ.

8. In verse 7, Paul instructs believers to **“pay to all what is owed to them,”** including taxes, revenue, and respect. How does this comprehensive command guide your behavior toward different forms of authority, such as government, employers, or leaders in the church?

9. How does the broader message of Romans 13:1-7 shape your understanding of how Christians should interact with government and authority in everyday life?

10. How can this understanding affect the way we pray for our leaders or engage in discussions about politics and justice?

NOTES

DEVOTION 1

AUTHORITY UNDER GOD

PASTOR JOHN CARTER

How many of us genuinely love the word authority? My guess is that it is not many of us. I mean, if you could think about the one special person that you want to give thanks and honor to, it would probably not be the one who is in authority over you. That said, authority is an important topic to reflect on, and how we respond to it says a lot about our faith and character.

How do you respond to the authority in your life? This includes the government, police, city officials, your boss, supervisor, and coworker who is in charge of a project. Do you approach your own role of authority with a sense of fear and trembling? How does this relate to the great responsibility of parenting that God might have given you?

Paul addresses this topic, offering clarity on how we should navigate both our roles as individuals in authority and our responses to those who oversee us.

Romans 13:1 says, ***“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.”***

The ultimate authority is God! He is the example of true, righteous, just, perfect, merciful, and forgiving authority. He is the authority to which we should all desire to be subject. If we are in positions of authority, then He should be our example of what we strive for in our positions of authority.

Imagine if every person in authority reflected the character of God perfectly in their position over others. There would be a confidence

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that the one in authority loved us, cared about us, desired what was best for us, responded with a voice of tenderness and kindness, and offered forgiveness. They would rule with justice and mercy. This is the kind of authority I love to submit to.

The rift comes when the human authority we live under does not reflect the character and behavior of the ultimate authority - the authority of God. This is the ultimate dilemma. Paul will go on and work through this difficulty, and in the coming days, you will read devotions that will help you navigate that. The one question that I think is the most relevant of all is, "Do you desire to be subject to the ultimate authority?" That is really the core of this passage. If God is your ultimate authority, are you going to be obedient to Him regardless of whether there is good or bad human authority? If Jesus is your true ultimate authority, you know that all other authority is there for a reason, good or bad. That is really hard for us to grasp as believers because we only want the good authority, not the bad.

Ultimately, the question we must wrestle with is whether we are willing to submit to God as the ultimate authority in our lives. When we recognize Him and His perfect character, it transforms the way we view all other forms of authority. God's example challenges us to lead with humility, justice, and mercy in our own positions of influence while trusting His purposes even when human authority falls short. As we reflect on this, let us ask ourselves: are we modeling the character of God in our leadership? Are we trusting His plan when others in authority fail us? The journey of submission to God's ultimate authority is not easy, but it is the path to peace, growth, and deeper faith. May we walk this path with confidence, knowing that He is working all things together for His glory and our good.

DEVOTION 2

RESPONDING TO OTHERS IN GOVERNMENT

RICH SAWICKI

“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.” Romans 13:1-2

The Bible has something to say about every area of life, even how we respond to people in government. Romans 13:1-2 reminds us that all authority comes from God. That can be hard to hear, especially if we do not agree with the leaders in charge. However, this passage teaches us an important truth: God is in control, even when it feels like everything is out of control.

Paul, the writer of Romans, lived under a government that often mistreated Christians. Yet, he told believers to respect their leaders. Why is this important? It is because any power can work for God's purposes, even when we do not see the big picture. It is not our place to wonder why God selects some individuals to hold leadership positions. We need to practice our faith and follow His commands.

Does this mean that we have to support the government's every move? No. Christians are those who follow Jesus. We are obligated to obey God rather than man if a statute or regulation is in direct opposition to God's Word. However, it is expected that we respond with love and respect even in those situations.

Think about Jesus. Roman rule was anything but perfect for Him; yet, He never once challenged the leadership or tried to spark a

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rebellion. He was honest, but He did it with grace and love. That is the example we are called to follow.

So, how does this look in our daily lives? First, our leaders need our prayers. They need wisdom, courage, and direction regardless of whether or not we voted for them. Praying for them involves asking God to influence their choices and hearts.

Second, we can honor them with our words and actions. It is easy to criticize and complain, but that is not what God calls us to do. We can disagree without being disrespectful. When we speak kindly about leaders, even when we disagree, we reflect God's love.

Finally, we can trust that God is working behind the scenes. Even when it feels like things are going wrong, God is still in control. Our hope is not in governments or policies but in God's perfect plan.

Let us be people who shine God's light, even in how we respond to our government leaders. Pray for them. Show respect. Trust God. When we live this way, we show the world that our faith is real, and we honor the One who holds all authority in His hands.

DEVOTION 3

ULTIMATE AUTHORITY

MARK PITTENGER

“For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” Romans 13:3-4

Paul continues to establish his point that those in positions of authority are placed by God and ultimately under the authority of God. If we believe that Jesus has the ultimate authority, as stated in Matthew 28:18, then we know that He is in control. So, Paul stresses that we should submit to our governing officials. Paul says, ***“Rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad.”*** He goes on to say, ***“Do what is good, and you will receive his approval.”***

He is saying that if we are following the rules and obeying the laws, we should not have a problem. God has put people in those authority roles for the purpose of maintaining civility among communities and organizations. We may not understand why someone or a group of people have the role of authority, but we can be assured that God has it under control.

All throughout the Bible, we see God use non-believers to fulfill His will. In Ezra, God raised up Cyrus, an evil pagan king, to supply what was necessary and to lead the rebuilding of the House of God in Israel. In 1 Samuel chapter 17, Goliath was used to exalt David. Also, let us remember that the Romans put an innocent man to death when they beat the nails into Jesus’ hands and feet, hanging Him on the cross.

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At the time Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, the world was under the Roman empire, and the rulers led a pagan, polytheistic society in which Christians were persecuted. This makes Paul's writing seem a bit outlandish as he instructs the believers in Rome to submit to the authorities. Paul is saying to remain strong in faith and live in a way that is pleasing to God.

Some may see the current state of the American political system as similar to the Roman Empire in that God is being removed from society. One may even say that we can relate to submitting to a government that does not follow Jesus. We can relate to a teaching that does not necessarily make sense. However, is that not the Gospel? The perfect God sent His perfect Son to be the perfect Savior for a broken world (John 3:16). It does not make sense; yet, that is what He did! He commands us to follow His lead. This sometimes may mean doing something we do not understand. This is why God's Word includes Proverbs 3:5-6, ***"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths."***

In America, we worship Jesus without persecution. We hold the right to cast votes for our preferred authorities. We may not always end up with the political outcome we prefer, but we can rest assured that no matter who the world puts in authority over us, they all are under the ultimate authority of God!

DEVOTION 4 CITIZEN OF HEAVEN

JOANNA MONTGOMERY

I used to work for the county clerk's office. When I worked there, I was in charge of opening and distributing mail. Every now and then, we would get a letter from a "sovereign citizen" who felt the government was oppressive and they did not need to follow the law. They would use a lot of legal language and pull content from historical legal documents to show how they were exempt from the law. Most of the people at the office would roll their eyes, talk about what a bunch of crazy people these were, and then go on with their day.

Many of these sovereign citizens claimed that the Christian faith was the reason they were above the law. One of these letters was from a person who refused to show up to court because it was not the government's place to tell them how much child support they were supposed to pay and on what regularity they should pay it. Some of these letters had some valid points, and some were completely checked out of reality. Were these people right, or were they wrong? To discern truth, we should always rely on the Word of God.

As believers in Christ, our citizenship is in Heaven; however, for the time being, we are also citizens of this world. While we may not like our government leaders, God has appointed government as our authority. Romans 13:6 states, ***"You also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing."*** Granted, we have a lot of crooked politicians in office, but so did Paul. Paul was subjected to the rule of the evil Nero. Paul even appealed his case before Nero, and despite the conditions Paul experienced, he still said we should obey our government authority. According to Romans 13:5, we do this ***"not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience."***

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Even though Satan is the ruler of this world, and many political leaders lean away from the teachings of Jesus, God still has control. He puts rulers in place and takes them down. He does not forget about our world or struggle to figure out whom to put in place. He is never worried about what is going on in government. God has not abdicated His authority. He is in complete control.

Our walk with Christ is not God's plan to improve government on this Earth. Our job, according to the Bible, is to share the Gospel with others. According to Romans 1:16, ***"Is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."***

Governments are put in place by God to protect people and keep law and order, and when they do not do that, they fail. According to Romans 13:5-7, we are to respect the rulers who enforce laws. We are to obey laws. We are to pay taxes, and not only when we agree on how the money is being allocated.

In the United States, we are fortunate because we can vote for leaders who align with our beliefs or vote against those who stand against the Bible. We can protest laws and rules that go against Scripture, but many Christians around the world cannot. Even so, according to Paul in Romans, we should obey the government and submit to that authority. As Christians, our citizenship is in Heaven; however, we should still be Christ-like citizens in this world.

DEVOTION 5

ALL WE HAVE TO GIVE IS LOVE

CATHY STORY

When you hear the word “giving” what comes to mind? In the church context, giving may immediately cause you to think of tithing or giving money. Closer to Thanksgiving, you may think of giving thanks. Possibly, if we were closer to Christmas, you would think of giving gifts. A list of all the ways in which we could give to others would be incredibly long. The reality is that there are many ways and items that can be given to others. Feelings and thoughts regarding giving can be extremely varied. Considering giving may cause some to feel anxious over feeling that they do not give enough or maybe wishing that what they gave was better. Some people love giving; it comes naturally, and it brings them joy. They have been blessed with much and love to give a portion of that to others.

As with so many other things in life, we can really overcomplicate the idea of giving. We can spend an abundance of time, energy, and money on things like considering gifts, selecting gifts, purchasing gifts, and preparing gifts for others. We may withhold giving to others out of fear. This can include fear of time, fear of commitment, fear of their reaction, and fear of us having enough after we give.

In Romans 13:8, Paul writes, ***“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law.”*** In this verse, Paul reminds us of something that is commonly spoken of throughout the Bible. It is our call to love others. Jesus commanded in Matthew 22:37-39, ***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”***

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So, what do these verses remind us of? They remind us that we are called to give love. We are commanded to show the love of Christ to others. We complicate this by overthinking or thinking we are called to give so many other things: advice, criticism, and our own opinions. While we are called to help others, like giving clothes and food to those in need, one of the biggest things we are called to give is love. Think about that today: who can you show love to?

DEVOTION 6

SUBMERSE YOURSELF

KATIE PETTIBONE

“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.” Romans 13:8-10

It can feel overwhelming when we have a million things on our to-do list. It can also be overwhelming when we have a million guidelines or rules to follow, especially at our jobs, because we do not want to mess things up. I remember when I was in college, my favorite thing to do was write essays. Essays gave me peace because they were easy for me. Well, they were easy for me up until I had this one professor who absolutely tore me to shreds when it came to my essays. I remember the first time I turned one in to him. I felt great and confident in it, but when I got the grade back along with two pages worth of criticism, my perspective soon changed. He said a lot, including a list of rules when it came to writing. He gave me a copy of a worksheet that gave details of how he graded papers so that I could further work on my abilities. Looking back, it was very kind of him, but during that time, it felt like I had to follow 100 different rules in order to get a good grade. After that, I did not like writing essays much anymore because I became too critical of myself.

We can begin to be over-critical of ourselves when we focus too much on following the rules, and I think Paul is trying to get at that in this passage. As a Christian, it can be hard to get everything right. When someone does us wrong or we meet someone who challenges us (like a college professor), it can be hard to love them.

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Sometimes, we mess up, and we do not honor the law that we have been blessed with. Often, instead of leaning on the Lord to forgive and to help us repent, we unknowingly say, "I can fix this on my own." Then, we choose our own way of going about things, and that can lead to a path of stress, anxiety, and cynicism. We need to remember that as Christ's followers, we are called to love the Lord first.

Matthew 22:37-40 says, ***"And he said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.'"***

We love the Lord by giving our lives to Him. We also love Him by praying in times of need or even in times of joy. We love Him by studying His Word, worshiping, praising, and putting His needs before our own. Loving the Lord is like submersing yourself in water, fully surrounding yourself in Him. Once you have fully done so, you will seamlessly fulfill the law. This means that the love you feel in your heart will start to affect the way you act. It will become easier to love those who challenge you. It will be easier to not do the sin that you have been struggling with for years. You will start to be Christlike in your actions, and this will further lead you to fulfill His law effortlessly.

However, it takes work to get to this point. It takes discernment. It also takes you allowing the Lord to open up old wounds that have not been healed. When you have a moment, take a look at 1 John 1:5-10, which talks about walking in the light. You will find that it takes you fully allowing the Lord to be the Lord of your life - to fully submerge yourself in Him, to walk in the light. Once you love Him first and then others, as Paul says, you will be fulfilling the law.

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Lesson 11

Romans 13:11-14

**GET UP!
ARE YOU
GOING TO
SLEEP ALL
DAY?**

Pastor Roy Townsend

I remember that when I was a kid, there were a few words that I hated to hear on Saturday mornings. With school and church each week, Saturday was my only day to sleep in. However, my parents were in the habit of getting up super early for work, and they could not sleep in as we could. Eventually, we would hear these dreaded words, “Get up! Are you going to sleep all day?” I remember getting up out of bed and having a really hard time functioning, answering questions, and getting ready for the day.

1. Did you ever have a hard time getting up when you were a kid? Did you have family members that made you get up?

2. Do you have any funny stories to share about having trouble getting up in the morning?

This might sound weird to you, but in the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul gives a special warning about it being time for us to “get up.” Romans 13:11-14 reads, ***“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”*** We must get up or wake up because Scripture says that ***“the hour has come”*** or we ***“know the time.”*** This warning is similar to 1 Thessalonians 5:5-8, which reads, ***“For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of***

the night or of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation." We can see in these verses the importance of getting up or waking up from our sleep.

We must realize that these warnings are telling us to live in light of the knowledge that Christ's return is imminent. Christians since the first century have been encouraged to live for the sake of Christ and for the sake of others. If you have not been called home by God yet, then we are here to live each day for Christ like it was our last day. There is a strong emphasis and reminder that we want to be found faithful in how we live and how we share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

3. What are the temptations that might be lulling God's children into sleeping while waiting for the return of Christ?

4. Do we find ourselves falling asleep while we are waiting for Christ's return? Please explain.

5. What is meant by Scripture revealing, ***"For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed"***?

For those who remain alive, the culmination of our salvation experience happens when Christ returns or when we pass away into the presence of God. When each day passes, we are closer and closer to the culmination of our salvation experience. It started with us first believing and confessing and will continue till we reach the presence of God in Heaven.

We all know after we get up each morning, we get cleaned up and dressed for the day at hand. It is interesting that this Scripture follows our daily routines. The passage commands us to ***“cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”***

6. Do you have morning routines for getting ready for the day? These passages are a reminder to be clear-headed and sober-minded. What do you do to be clear-headed for the day?

7. The additional warning here is to put on appropriate attire for the job at hand. Do you have different types of clothing for the different jobs that you perform at work or for the family?

8. What do you think of when the Scripture says to put on the ***“armor of light”*** or ***“walk properly as in the daytime”***?

Again, we are warned here as His children that we have no business in being involved in the sinful pleasures of this world. They are not only wrong, but they distract us from being alert, awake, and clear-minded in preparation for Christ's return.

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Toward the end of this section of Scripture, we are reminded of the importance of our continued spiritual growth. So, not only are we to get up and wake up, but we are reminded to grow up. Ephesians 4:15 reads, ***“Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.”*** Then, what is the reminder for us? ***“Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”*** There is a beautiful aspect of our daily routine that we do not want to miss. Every day, I get up, and I always put something on to prepare myself for the activities of the day. In essence, I put something on again and again. We have the same situation here. Each day, I am to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. R. Kent Hughes reminds us, “It is true that if we are Christians, we have already put on the Lord Jesus Christ. Galatians 3:27 says, ***‘For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.’*** But our text here in Romans has reference to a practical day-to-day, repeated putting on of Christ. We are to embrace him again and again and again.”

9. How do we put on Christ?

10. When you have trouble getting up in the morning, do you use something to help you get up? What can we use to help us “get up” spiritually?

NOTES

DEVOTION 1 HE WILL RETURN

ELIJAH EDWARDS

The age-old question (that has always been slightly morbid to me) is, “If you knew when the end of the world would be, what would you do?” There are many answers to this question that are different for each of us, but we all have a good grasp of what we would do.

1. What would you do if you knew the time and day that it was all ending? Be honest with yourself.

The real question for all of us is whether we are aware and ready for when Jesus returns and whether we are living for ourselves or for eternity.

Romans 13:11-14 says, ***“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed. The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armour of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarrelling and jealousy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”***

In this passage, we are called to live in a manner that we know and are aware of Jesus' return. We need to live as if we are ready for Jesus to come again. We do not do this so that we can look good when He comes back or that we are checking off a box. It is a reminder that He is coming back. While we wait, since we are born again, we must act like that in order to show others that His way is better.

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2. Knowing this and after reading this passage, what are some things that you need to do differently?

We live differently because we are changed by Jesus. When interacting with others and living with other people, it is important that our lives reflect that Jesus is returning. This way, others can see the goodness of Jesus and turn to Him before it is too late.

3. How does that change the way you want to live more so than before?

DEVOTION 2

DO NOT WAIT

JEANNIE YATES

I do not like to wait. Two days for an Amazon delivery can feel like forever! We see that everywhere in our culture today. We want everything in an instant - coffee, mashed potatoes, and pain relief. We have become obsessed with instant gratification, always looking for the next quick fix to make us more “comfortable.” That is, until we start talking about our spiritual lives, then we can just take our time! “I can wait until I am older to think about God; I will wait until I have children of my own; I will wait until I see a sign from Heaven; I have a long time until Jesus comes back; I am just waiting for my friend to notice I follow God and ask me about it.” Have you ever made one of those excuses or one like it?

Romans 13:11 says, ***“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.”*** The Apostle Paul starts off this verse with a connective phrase: ***“Besides this.”*** In order to really understand what he is about to say, we need to have a good idea of what he previously said. Starting in verse 8, Paul writes, ***“Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments...are summed up in this word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law”*** (Romans 13:8-10). Paul reminds us that following the commandments means to love our neighbor, and loving our neighbor means that we fulfill the Law. It is now time to wake up! We need to quit putting off what God wants us to do because the day of salvation is near. We must have a sense of urgency - like waiting for the Amazon truck.

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I love how *“The Message”* paraphrases this passage in Romans. “Love other people as well as you do yourself. You can’t go wrong when you love others. When you add up everything in the law code, the sum total is love. But make sure that you don’t get so absorbed and exhausted in taking care of all your day-by-day obligations that you lose track of the time and doze off, oblivious to God. The night is about over, dawn is about to break. Be up and awake to what God is doing! God is putting the finishing touches on the salvation work he began when we first believed” (Romans 13:10-14, MSG).

Do we love one another that way? Do we love our neighbor enough to share the Gospel without hesitation, without putting it off? Remember what Paul says here, ***“Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.”*** Who around you needs to know? I pray that we are all awakened with a desperate need to share the Gospel of Jesus with anyone and everyone. We should be ready to make the most of every opportunity because of how we love those around us. Are you “up and awake to what God is doing”?

Matthew 24:42 says, ***“Stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”*** Matthew 24:44 adds, ***“Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.”***

DEVOTION 3 IN THE LIGHT

SIERRA COMBS

“The night is nearly over; the day is almost here. So let us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy.” Romans 13:12-13 (NIV)

Recently, my teenage daughter asked about the type of music I listened to when I was her age. Before she even got the question out of her mouth, I had my iTunes open, pulling up songs from decades ago and giving her quite a history lesson of all the rad music from the 90s and early 2000s. Most of the songs she laughed at (I did, too), but there were a few that have proved timeless. As I scrolled through my old albums and playlists, I was reminded of a song that I once held dear: *“In the Light”* by DC Talk. As I listened to it, the words hit me with the same mix of conviction and hope as they did thirty years ago:

I wanna be in the light, as You are in the light.
I wanna shine like the stars in the heavens.
Oh Lord, be my light and be my salvation,
‘cause all I want is to be in the light.

As I think through the lyrics, I am reminded of Romans 13:12-13. Paul’s call to leave behind the deeds of darkness and walk in the light resonates with the song’s cry for authenticity and holiness. Both the song and the Scripture remind me that living in the light of Christ is not just a one-time decision but a daily surrender.

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One set of lyrics from *"In the Light"* have convicted me since the day I first heard them:

The disease of self runs through my blood,
it's a cancer fatal to my soul.
Every attempt on my behalf has failed
to bring this sickness under control.

Who would have thought that thirty years later, this would still be a struggle? This disease of self, my flesh, is wickedly selfish. Even when I strive to live righteously and rely on my own strength, I will always fall short. Whether it is my pride, impatience, or fear of letting others see my flaws, this struggle reminds me of how much I need Christ. Paul's words in Romans speak to this battle. The **"deeds of darkness"** that he mentions are not just external sins like sexual immorality and drunkenness; they are also internal attitudes and habits that hinder us from the good things God has for us. They are things like the jealousy we harbor, the grudges we cling to, and the selfishness that quietly drives our decisions. It is easy to excuse these hidden things away. The song lyrics speak to this when they say:

I am the king of excuses,
I've got one for every selfish thing I do.
What's going on inside me?
I despise my own behavior.
This only serves to confirm my suspicion,
I am still a man in need of a Savior.

The great news is that we do not have to fight this battle alone. We have a Savior who calls us to step into His light where transformation is possible. Paul tells us to **"put aside the deeds of darkness."** I love how the NLT version translates this when it says, **"So remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes, and put on the shining armor of right living."** Get rid of those dirty rags! It is so easy to keep

parts of our lives hidden in the shadows, like things that we do not want others (or even God) to see. Secrecy thrives in darkness, but just because the dirt cannot be seen does not mean it is not there. It is when we expose these things and step into the light that we can experience true freedom. The night is nearly over, and the day is near! Now is the time to stop hiding in the dark and surrender your struggles to the Lord.

Paul's challenge to ***"behave decently, as in the daytime"*** reminds me that living in the light means putting ourselves on full display. This light is not just for the individual; we were made to reflect the Lord's love and truth to others. The world is watching, and our life is a testimony! When we live authentically in the light, others can see the hope and joy we have in Christ shining through. As the song says, it is then that we will "shine like the stars in the heavens!" As we continue to apply the truth of God's Word to our lives, let us ask Him to expose the darkness we are hiding in. May we leave the night behind us and walk in the light of Christ. As for me, "All I want is to be in the light."

DEVOTION 4

THE DAY IS AT HAND

JOSH THAYER

Let us take a moment to talk about living with eternity in mind. In Romans 13:12-13, Paul gives us a powerful reminder of how our awareness of eternity shapes the way we live, especially in how we treat others. He says, ***“The night is far gone; the day is at hand. So then let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.”***

Paul starts with a wake-up call, ***“The night is far gone; the day is at hand.”*** He is reminding us that we are living in a temporary world. The ***“night”*** represents the current age of sin and brokenness, but the ***“day”*** points to Christ’s return and the eternal Kingdom to come. Time is moving forward, and with every passing moment, we are getting closer to eternity. That is not meant to scare us but to focus us. Knowing the day is near gives us a sense of urgency and purpose.

Then Paul says, ***“Let us cast off the works of darkness and put on the armor of light.”*** This is a call to action. ***“Works of darkness”*** are things like sin, selfishness, and anything that draws us away from God. They do not belong in the lives of people who are living for eternity. Instead, we are called to put on the ***“armor of light.”*** This is living in a way that reflects Christ to the world around us. Think of it like suiting up for battle, not against people, but against the temptations and distractions that pull us away from God’s purpose.

Paul gets specific in verse 13, saying, ***“Let us walk properly as in the daytime.”*** That means living in a way that honors God and

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shows His love to others. Paul lists some examples of behavior to avoid. It is things like drunkenness, immorality, quarreling, and jealousy. These are not just personal issues; they damage our relationships with others and distract us from God's mission. When we live with eternity in mind, we let go of those things and instead strive to love, serve, and build up those around us.

So, how does this tie into our relationships? When we are focused on eternity, it changes how we see people. We stop viewing them through the lens of our frustrations or differences, and we start seeing them as eternal souls loved by God. That perspective motivates us to show kindness, grace, and love, even when it is hard. It is not just about how we live; it is about how we help others see the light of Christ through our actions.

Here is the takeaway: eternity is not just a future reality; it is a lens through which we live today. Let us cast off the things that weigh us down and put on the ***“armor of light.”*** Let us walk in a way that reflects Christ, loving others with eternity in mind.

DEVOTION 5 DRESS FOR SUCCESS

STEPHEN BILLINGS

“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.” Romans 13:14

Each morning, when I wake up, I am faced with a question. In fact, we are all faced with this same question, which is frankly very easy to answer. The question is, “What am I going to wear today?” When I ask myself this question each day, I go on to ask myself a few more questions, including: “What do I have planned for that day? How warm or cold is it outside? Which clothes do I have clean?” After asking myself these questions, I then make a choice about which clothes would be best for me to wear.

When Paul, the author of the book of Romans, writes, ***“but put on the Lord Jesus Christ”*** in Romans 13:14, he is giving his readers instruction to consider what they will be spiritually wearing for the day. Each day, we must make this choice: will we ***“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”*** or make ***“provision for the flesh”***?

When Paul says, ***“put on the Lord Jesus Christ,”*** he is challenging us to make the choice to live our lives as Jesus would. Practically, this looks like starting each and every day in prayer, asking God to help us live our lives for Him. Galatians 5:16 shares, ***“But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh.”*** We ***“walk by the Spirit”*** by praying without ceasing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). This constant connection to our Creator through prayer is how we can ***“put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”***

However, Paul not only presents us with the challenge to ***“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”*** but also to ***“make no provision for the flesh.”*** The flesh which Paul mentions is also known as our

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sinful nature. While sin can also be known as the desires of the flesh, not all fleshly desires are sinful. There can be many fleshly desires that, when acted upon, can lead to sin or are sinful in and of themselves. We need the grace of Jesus, found through His death and resurrection, to be able to ***“put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”*** The grace of Jesus can be accepted by confessing with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believing that God raised Him from the dead.

My prayer today is for each of us to take a moment to ask ourselves Paul's question: Are we willing to ***“put on the Lord Jesus Christ”*** each and every day?

DEVOTION 6

WHAT IS EATING YOU?

KARSEN THEEDE

Google defines a parasite as “an organism that lives in or on an organism of another species (its host) and benefits by deriving nutrients at the other’s expense.” Parasites are one of the most dreaded creatures in nature. The freeloaders of the animal kingdom have enough power to destroy entire ecosystems or our economies. Even just one parasite can cause immense chaos, and because of that, they are dealt with very quickly and thoroughly to ensure the damage is contained. The thing is, in life, there is a parasite that we all carry, whether we choose to or not. However, we do have a choice when it comes to how we deal with it. We can either cut it off at the source or continue to let it grow and eat away at us.

Romans 13:14 states, ***“But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.”***

This parasite I talked about earlier is the ***“flesh”*** referenced in verse 14. If we translate the word ***“flesh”*** in this context, it simply means sinful humanity. This parasite that we all have is our sin. Sin will eat away at us if it is left unchecked and will continue until there is nothing left, but just like a parasite, there is a treatment.

That treatment for our sins is Jesus and what He did for us on the cross. The cure is there, and all we have to do is accept it. As verse 14 says, ***“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”*** It does not end there, though. Once we have Jesus, the cure, we should not do the things that were feeding the parasite or our sin again. When we do that, our sin will appear again, and once again, it will start to eat away at us. Jesus is the cure to our sin, but we must not ***“gratify its desires,”*** as verse 14 says. Do not get the cure, and then turn around and start feeding the parasite again.

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“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Romans 6:23

The background of the entire page is a light-colored marbled paper with swirling, organic patterns in shades of grey, white, and pale yellow. The marbling is most prominent on the left side and bottom, creating a textured, artistic backdrop for the text.

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Lesson 12

Romans 14:1-15:13

OPINIONS

Pastor Roy Townsend

One of my favorite downtime activities with my kids is watching certain Disney movies. The *“Inside Out”* movies have steadily grown to the top of our favorites. This movie explores how a person thinks and operates with many humorous idioms. One of my favorite jokes is when a character knocks over two crates, both with similar-looking tiles. The main character begins to try to sort the mess while saying, “Oh no! These facts and opinions look so similar.” I laugh every time when another character says, “Happens all the time,” and begins to shovel both the facts and opinions back into one box without sorting them. The realness of this scene is so applicable to our everyday lives.

1. What are some common opinions that get mixed up as facts?

In Romans chapter 14, Paul addresses the importance of unity within the Church and the potential disruption caused by differing opinions. Nowhere in the Bible does it say that we all must have the same opinion about everything. I have to imagine that even during Jesus’ earthly ministry, Matthew and Simon the Zealot disagreed about some things. God’s Word does not tell us that we have to be cookie cutters of each other, but God’s Word does emphasize that a follower of Christ should prioritize love and unity with their brothers and sisters over personal preferences and judgments. Too often, inside the church, damage can be caused relationally when we struggle to differentiate the differences between our opinions, personal convictions, and the facts of God’s Word.

2. What common opinions can most harm the Church? What are some truths the Church should never lose hold of?

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Romans 14:13-15 says, ***“Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”***

3. What does the Bible mean by a **“stumbling block”** in verse 13? How can we avoid being a stumbling block to others?

4. What are some common **“unclean”** activities that can cause a believer to judge others?

We have to look at ourselves and realize that we are not the standard, Jesus is. While the convictions that we hold, on how we are to live out the realness of the Gospel, are a thing to hold on to, we still must hold on to the truth that it is Jesus' Word that is fact. Unless we are holding to the words God says properly, we have to walk cautiously when we start looking at how we think things should be. In a world full of broken, fallen people, we will actually encounter someone who sins differently than us. I heard it said, “If you want to aggravate a believer, put them in a room with a person who sins differently than them.” Our focus and goal as believers must be to live in a way that loves God with all that we have and love others as Jesus commands. We must live out our relationship with Jesus in a way where we are not folding to others' convictions but also ensuring that we are not tripping or hindering others from

growing in their walk with Jesus or from encountering Jesus for the first time. For Paul, he is talking to a church that is composed of Jews and Gentiles. Paul urges all those who follow Christ to refrain from passing judgment on one another and to avoid causing others to stumble through their actions. Here, God's Word highlights the importance of having an opinion while continuing to act in love and being considerate of others' opinions, views, or convictions.

5. How do you navigate through the tension of different opinions with people you worship with?

6. What are some practical ways we, as Jesus' Church, can prioritize love and consideration for others in our church community that we disagree with?

Romans 14:16-19 adds, ***“So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.”***

7. How can we balance personal convictions with the need for unity in the church?

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8. Why is it important to consider the spiritual well-being of others in our actions and decisions?

So often, believers can lose sight of what our focus in life should be. I have had this happen more often than I care to admit. When I start living out my opinions and personal convictions more than living in a way that ensures Christ's Kingdom is expanding on Earth, I find myself looking less like Christ. I hold fast to the truth that Jesus has built His Church with people who are different from me. Too often, we see others' differences as a hindrance when, in actuality, it is Christ who brings those to His Church. If the Church was full of people who were just like you, how impactful would the church be?

9. How can your Growth Community begin pursuing ***“mutual upbuilding”***?

10. Are there ways you may be causing others to stumble? How can you be more considerate of others' convictions?

Opinions should never become something that is used to destroy or diminish a relationship. The one fact every believer should put their utmost confidence in is the Gospel. It is true that God loved a lovely, opinionated world so much He sent His Son to die on the cross for all of humanity. Even if we disagree with a person about something such as politics, tattoos, music, or drinking alcohol, we should never make those issues more important than a person coming to a saving relationship with Jesus.

NOTES

DEVOTION 1

SELFLESSNESS

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD

In Romans chapter 14, Paul writes of the strife and judgment going on between Jews and Gentiles. The reality of strife and judgment is that they are a natural part of the broken and sinful human nature into which we are all born. Therefore, with the cultural and theological differences that the Jews and Gentiles had during this time, Paul encourages them with these words in Romans 14:1-4, ***“As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.”***

We have all been created uniquely different. I am truly so thankful for this. I am not sure if I could spend time with someone who was exactly like me! Yet, no matter if someone is from the same city as us, has the same skin color, balding or long curly hair, a bodybuilder or hybrid athlete, book nerd or movie nerd, whatever differences we can have between those around us, Paul highlights the foundational common denominator: Jesus. There were many differences in daily practices, cultural upbringing, and theological understanding between Jewish and Gentile believers in Jesus Christ. What Paul is calling for is unity. He called for unity and reminded the people to set aside differences. He wanted them to not nitpick or focus on what is right or wrong in their personal eyes. The Lord will be the One to deal with judgment. Paul declares in verse 1, ***“Welcome him.”***

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As you continue through your week and as we continue to dig deeper into this incredible letter to the Romans, will you welcome? Will you set aside differences that we have and will always find in those we come in contact with in this life? Will you focus on the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which brings reconciliation, redemption, hope, selflessness, and unity? I pray that we will all do a daily heart check to make sure we focus on the main point of the Gospel: Christ's death and resurrection. Then, we can obediently and lovingly be Christ's witnesses to a broken world. The awesome thing about this is that we do not have to take on this task alone. We are surrounded by our brothers and sisters across the world who have been called to the same mission and love from our Heavenly Father!

DEVOTION 2

STANDING ALONE

JASMYN BICKNELL

Whenever I read a passage on judgment, I feel majorly convicted. We are regularly warned against unrighteous judgment in the Bible (Matthew 7:1-5; Romans 2:1-5; 1 Corinthians 4:5; and John 7:24) because God is the ultimate Judge, and we are called to simply love and care for people. In today's culture, it is very common for people to comment on other people's appearance or how they speak or act. Honestly, it is much easier to look at someone else's life and talk about what they could do better rather than look at our own life to fix that.

In Romans chapter 14, judgment on others is addressed again. In verse 10, Paul says, ***“Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.”*** He continues the thought in verse 12. ***“So then each of us will give an account of himself to God.”*** I think the key thing here is this last part, ***“each of us will give an account of himself.”*** We are not going to be asked what we saw our neighbor do, or our aunt or brother, but we are going to stand before the Lord, and He is going to judge us solely on what fruits we bore during our time on Earth. Some may find this to be scary, or it may make you nervous, but that is the opposite of the feeling you should have! Praise God that I am not responsible for other people's actions. Let that bring peace to you, knowing you only have to worry about yourself.

Do not get me wrong; we are to help keep each other accountable. We are to look out for our brothers and sisters to make sure they do not fall. Yet, when we stand or kneel before the Lord at the Bema Seat Judgment (the believers' judgment), the Lord will focus solely on each of us individually.

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So, I want to challenge you. Are you spending all of your time telling other people how to change and be better while you continue doing the exact same thing? Or, are you going to focus on making sure your own heart is in the right place and spread the truth of God's Word, showing them the love that the Lord has commanded us to show?

DEVOTION 3

IT IS ABOUT CHRIST

CHRIS MONTVILLE

The beginning of Romans chapter 14 lays out the sentiment that we are not to pass judgment on our fellow Christians for differences in convictions around minor details. Some of the examples it gives are those who abstain from certain foods and those who celebrate certain holidays or traditions. Today, we are focusing on the second half of the chapter that continues this idea.

Romans 14:13-17 says, ***“Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.”***

What we learn from Romans chapter 14 is that Christians will have different consciences for certain things. One example I grew up with and had to deal with as a young adult and new Christian, was eating meat on Fridays during Lent. For those unfamiliar with Lent, it is a period of time leading up to Easter that certain denominations, including the Catholic church, celebrate. During this time, it is highly encouraged not to eat meat on Fridays. I grew up observing Lent and following this practice; however, as I got older, I no longer held to the same belief. It did not seem to benefit my walk with Christ spiritually. Therefore, I began eating meat on Fridays during Lent. However, I still had friends and family who I grew up with who held to this belief, so what do I do?

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I appreciate something Mike Winger pointed out when commentating on this passage. He explains that the burden seems to lie on the Christian with the “stronger conscience.” Verse 15 tells us, ***“For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died.”*** This, in combination with verse 19, ***“So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding,”*** tells us that the priority in these scenarios is the mutual upbuilding of the Church. These secondary issues or opinions should never be a reason for division in our fellowship.

You may disagree with someone on a topic that seems insignificant to you. However, if that topic is something that helps their walk with Christ, it is not our place to judge that thought or to condemn our fellow brother or sister for their view, as long as it is not contrary to Scripture. Our job is to mutually build each other up.

Our attitude should never be, “Get over it,” but rather, “How do I best glorify Christ to you?” It is not about us; it never is. It is about Christ. Let us always make that our focus when loving one another.

DEVOTION 4 STUMBLING

MARC-E DELCAMP

Growing up, I always remember visiting my grandparents for vacations. They lived in the middle of nowhere, in a little town called Mifflinburg, Pennsylvania. On one vacation, we were out in the barn where the cows stayed, shoveling manure (a really fun vacation). While we were working, my older sister thought it would be funny to trip me, causing me to fall face-first into a pile of cow manure. I was only four years old at the time, so I darted straight down to the house, crying to my mom about how she tripped me and how I was covered in poop.

Our verses for today talk about a different kind of stumbling. It is not a physical stumble where you fall into a pile of manure, but a spiritual stumble.

In Romans 14:20-23, Paul writes, ***“Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.”***

In these verses, the **“food”** Paul refers to relates to the Old Testament Law, which forbade Jews from eating certain foods because they were considered unclean. In Mark 7:19, Jesus declared that all foods are clean (a point Paul reiterates in verse 20). For the Gentiles (the people Paul is addressing in Romans), this declaration did not significantly affect their way of life. They had not grown up in a culture that abstained from certain foods.

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However, for Jewish believers, this was life-changing. They had spent their lives being told that eating certain foods was sinful. Now, suddenly, everything was permissible. For many, this led to a struggle of conscience or even doubt about whether they should eat these foods.

Paul's message to the Gentile believers is clear: do not pressure Jewish believers into violating their conscience, as this would cause them to sin. While eating these foods is not inherently sinful for either Jewish or Gentile Christians, Paul points to a deeper truth - each believer is at a different stage in their walk with Christ. Our brothers and sisters in Christ have different convictions, and ignoring or dismissing those convictions can lead them into sin.

Paul calls us to respect the convictions of others and not to be a stumbling block. Instead, we are to build one another up. In 1 Thessalonians 5:11 (NIV), Paul says, ***“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up.”*** Let us honor and respect the unique journey of each believer, and let us focus on encouraging and strengthening one another in the Lord.

DEVOTION 5

THE FOOD PANTRY

KATRINA YOUNG

If you have been around The River Church for any length of time, you know that we have certain times of the year that we have a designated focus to Join the Team. You would have heard how serving is a vital part of how the church functions as a whole and that every area of serving has a purpose and is equally as important as another. Even though some are desired more than others, they do not necessarily have the same need. One of the areas of ministry that I have the privilege of overseeing is the Food Pantry. I will be completely honest in saying that I did not know much about what it was at first; I just knew that we had one. I knew it was on Saturdays, and not many people would want to sign up to serve there because of the weekend commitment. I could not have been more wrong!

One of my favorite stories comes from one of the volunteers who always serves on Saturday mornings with a smile. She recently shared a story of one of the ladies who comes to the pantry regularly that was very difficult to talk with. This lady never really made eye contact, never shared a hello, and seemed sad and hopeless. The volunteer continued to greet her, ask her if there was anything she could pray about for her, and did not let the lady's sadness affect her in continuing to show her love. One morning, after four years of greeting and asking if there was something to pray for, the lady said, "Yes, there is." She then sat with the volunteer and shared her story of her grief at the loss of her husband and asked for forgiveness. It would have been easy for that volunteer to give up on this lady after not receiving any glimpse of acknowledgment. I am so thankful that her heart was to continue to show her love consistently.

Romans 15:1 says, ***"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves."***

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Paul tells us as believers that we have an obligation to not give up on those of weaker faith but to continue to be persistent in showing God's love toward them. He is encouraging us as believers to put the needs of others before our own. It is not to please ourselves but to glorify God. We, as members of the body of Christ, are all very different and unique. Our roles are equally different and equally important in serving. In 1 Corinthians 12:22, Paul says, ***“The parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor.”*** We are all a part of one body and God arranged each part as he chose.

If you have committed to joining the team, you may be involved in one ministry or many. My prayer is that each of us embrace the gift that each of us has and not lose sight of the obligation we are called to. Look for ways to use the gifts that God has given you. Just like my volunteer continued to show love, you can be that encouragement to someone that God puts in your path today.

DEVOTION 6

THE EYE OF THE TIGER

PASTOR GARY WRIGHT

“For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.” Romans 15:8

When I was a kid, I was a big fan of all the “Rocky” movies. I do not know if you have seen them, but in “Rocky I” and “Rocky II,” Rocky’s nemesis is a boxer named Apollo Creed. They were enemies. In “Rocky III,” Rocky’s trainer dies of a heart attack. Apollo Creed offers to take the job as Rocky’s new trainer. Rocky and Apollo both want to defeat a bully boxer named Clubber Lang, so they overcome their differences and accept each other because of this common goal.

In Romans 15:8, Paul is speaking about two groups of people who were also enemies: Jews and Gentiles. Both the Jewish group and the Gentile group that Paul is speaking to are Christians who have put their faith in Jesus. Since both groups are Christians, they are part of the Church of Jesus Christ. Both groups have the same goal, which is to bring glory to God. Paul is encouraging the two groups to accept one another. Paul uses Jesus as an example. Read Romans 15:7, ***“Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.”*** Paul explains that Jesus accepted them with love, grace, and forgiveness. Paul encourages them to follow Jesus’ example.

It is no different in the church today. Jesus saves people from all walks of life with many different backgrounds, personalities, and interests. If we do not handle our differences with people in the right manner, it can push us apart and even cause us to be enemies.

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Believers who have put their faith in Jesus have a couple of things in common, just like Rocky and Apollo did. First, all believers have Christ's example of love. He accepted us with love and forgiveness, even though we did not deserve it. Second, all believers are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit produces fruit in us, such as love, patience, gentleness, and self-control. Only through the Holy Spirit's strength are we able to love and accept others who are different from us.

All believers are indwelt with the Holy Spirit. However, if we are not allowing the Spirit to guide and govern us by aligning our choices and decisions with the truth of Scripture, the fruit that the Holy Spirit produces will not be evident in our lives.

If you are not already, I want to encourage you to be in God's Word regularly. I would also like to encourage you to not only read God's Word, but also allow the Holy Spirit to use it to transform you into being more like Jesus. Only through that transformation will we be able to accept one another in such a diverse community as the Church of Jesus Christ, which will bring glory to God.

“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.” Ephesians 5:18

The background of the entire page is a light-colored marbled paper with swirling, organic patterns in shades of grey, white, and pale yellow. The pattern resembles stone or liquid swirls.

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Lesson 13

Romans 15:14 - 16:27

DOXOLOGY

Pastor Patrick Bicknell

When I was still in school, even in middle and high school, I always had an issue with staying focused in class. I remember times when my teacher would get mad at us for not paying attention, and they would stop class to explain how and why we needed to focus. They would say, “If you do not listen, you cannot learn. I cannot teach the class if you are being a distraction.” However, there never failed to be a person who, right after hearing the teacher give us a talk like this, would try and distract the class again. Most of the time, that was me. This makes sense as to why the middle and high school kids I have now, as the Student Pastor, do not listen to me sometimes! God does have a sense of humor. Anyways, back to the story. It did not matter how passionate or even right the teacher was in the speeches they would give, someone would always try to cause issues in the classroom.

1. What kind of student were you? Were you a distractor or a rule follower?

Paul speaks of something very similar towards the end of Romans chapter 16. It comes after detailing so many amazing truths through the first 15 chapters of the book that will help us know how we can be saved, how we can know about God, and how we relate to other believers. Paul begins his conclusion with a warning. In Romans 16:17-20, he writes, ***“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with***

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you.” This may seem like a downer message at the end of such a theologically rich letter, but he writes it for a reason. He knows that we are going to experience these struggles. He knows people are going to make their way into our church to cause divisions and fill their own appetites. So, we need to be on the watch for them.

2. Have you experienced someone trying to cause division in the church?

3. Has there ever been a time when you felt like you were deceived by someone in the church? How did that affect your relationship with God?

4. What does it mean to be ***“wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil”***?

5. Why is having sound theological doctrine good for guarding against people who might try to cause divisions?

Thankfully, Paul does not end the book with a doom and gloom outlook that people are going to come into the flock and cause division. He ends the book with a beautiful doxology that will be good for us to look at. For those who might not know what a doxology is,

it is essentially a hymn or short song to sing praise to God before a congregation leaves after a gathering. I want to split up Paul's doxology here into two parts. Romans 16:25-26 says, ***"Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith."*** As with everything in the Christian walk, we should always come back to the Gospel. Paul started with the Gospel in Romans 1:16-17, ***"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."*** He comes back to it to remind the first readers and for us today where our strength comes from.

6. How would you explain to a non-believer how the Gospel strengthens you? Can you share a time in your life when that was true?

7. What are some things that get in the way of you coming back to the Gospel for strength in your life?

The last part of his doxology ends with such a beautiful verse that I hope encourages you all as you read it. Romans 16:27 says, ***"To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen."*** I think it is so amazing that Paul wraps up this incredible letter with this verse. He is reminding us that everything is for the glory of God. We may still be confused by some parts of this letter, and we may not know exactly how to apply all the truths we have

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learned through this series. However, we can echo Paul, ***“To the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ!”***

8. After studying Romans, what is something you learned about God, Jesus, or salvation that you did not know before?

9. How can we use what we have learned through Romans to bring glory to God?

I want to end this lesson in a unique way. It does not matter whether you are good with words or not, the key is writing from your heart. Doxologies are a way for us to sing or say a short praise to God before we leave each other. Try to take a moment as a group or by yourself, and write a short doxology for you all to end this lesson with.

10. Write your doxology here:

NOTES

DEVOTION 1

WHAT IS YOUR AMBITION?

GRANT GRIMES

“And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, but as it is written, ‘Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.’” Romans 15:20-21

What is your ambition in life? Where do you find the drive to keep going? What are you willing to work for? As Paul begins to wrap up the book of Romans, he declares that his greatest desire is to preach the Gospel. This is not merely a task he enjoys or feels obligated to do. It is his ambition.

As individuals and as a church, we often hold many ambitions. These may include achieving success in our careers, raising families, or pursuing fitness and health. While these goals are not inherently wrong, we must ask, “Are they aligned with the mission Christ has called us to?” Every year, we revisit the mission of the church: to Reach the lost, Gather with the saints, and Grow in His Word. Each step emphasizes the centrality of the Gospel - sharing it, discussing it, and growing through it.

We are a church that believes the Gospel should be at the core of everything we do. Paul’s words in verse 20 highlight the importance of reaching the lost. His ambition is to proclaim the Good News to those who have not heard of Christ. There is a profound joy in sharing the love of Jesus with someone who has never experienced or accepted this truth. This joy should inspire us all, driving us to share the Gospel with determination and perseverance, especially with those where Christ has not **“been named.”**

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Sharing the Gospel is no small task. It requires hard work, effort, and courage. It is often a spiritual battle; yet, Scripture commands us to take on this mission (Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Corinthians 9:16). Our desires and ambitions in life must be Gospel-centered. As recipients of Christ's grace, we are called to share this same grace with others, motivated by the transformative power of the Gospel.

DEVOTION 2

THE CHRIST-FOLLOWERS OBLIGATION

CHRIS FREZZA

If you have been a believer in Jesus Christ for any length of time, you have been blessed. You have most assuredly experienced His love and His peace in your life. These things are a result of becoming part of God's family. They result from the salvation we possess through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus. God has reconciled us to Him and made us an object of His blessing. So, what happens in our life when we experience the goodness of God?

In Romans 15:26, Paul notes a contingent of Gentiles in Macedonia and Achaia, who he describes as people who were ***“pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem.”*** In the same verse, he also says the Gentiles owed it to the Jews in Jerusalem to serve them because of the blessing they were able to share. As God's ambassador to the Gentiles and an instrumental founder of the early church, Paul reminded the Gentiles that they had been blessed beyond measure to be part of the salvation originally set aside for the Jews. Because of that blessing, they had an obligation to bless the Jews, in turn, meeting their needs as their spiritual brothers and sisters.

Romans chapter 15 mentions the obligation of a believer multiple times. Paul is making it clear that we, as believers, receive the blessing of salvation from the Lord so that we can bless others in the same way. When you are at a church gathering on Sunday morning, do you walk in the door knowing you have an obligation to be a blessing to other believers? It is a disposition that does not happen by accident. It is all too easy to become complacent and take on the mindset of a consumer rather than an important member of the body

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of Christ who He has placed there to represent Him by blessing other people. This is a big part of our calling as Christ-followers.

Our gatherings as a church are a critical time to bless others with the love of Christ that He has poured onto us. We need to actively look for ways to bless other people in the church. We should want to find out what their needs are and how to meet those needs or find someone who can. As you attend your gathering this week, take a moment on Sunday morning in prayer before you leave your home. Thank the Lord for blessing you, then ask Him to show you who you can carry out your obligation as a believer on. It is your obligation to bless others. I do not know who God will use you to bless, but intentionally make yourself available for Him to use to do so. I do know that He will use you in a powerful way when you fulfill your obligation to be a blessing to others in the body of Christ.

DEVOTION 3

SAVED TO SERVE

DAVID HUDGENS

“I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae, that you may welcome her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints, and help her in whatever she may need from you, for she has been a patron of many and of myself as well.” Romans 16:1-2

In Paul’s closing remarks to the Romans, he introduces Phoebe, a woman who served the church in Cenchreae. He commends her as a servant and encourages the church to welcome her as they would any true follower of Jesus. This simple yet profound instruction reveals so much about the heart and purpose of the Christian community.

Phoebe was a helper to many, including Paul himself, and Paul’s words remind us that service to one another in the family of God is incredibly important. In fact, every contribution matters, whether it is words of encouragement, providing a meal, financial support, or simply being present for someone in need. As Christians, we are called to ***“love one another with brotherly affection”*** and to ***“outdo one another in showing honor”*** (Romans 12:10). This means looking beyond ourselves and our immediate needs in order to actively support others in their work for the Kingdom of God.

Welcoming and helping others in the body is not only practical kindness; it reflects the very nature of Christ. In Matthew 10:40, Jesus says, ***“Whoever receives you receives me.”*** When we receive others, we are embracing Christ Himself. That is an incredible reminder!

So, how can we apply this in our lives now, in the 21st century? Think about the Phobes around you, those who humbly serve.

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They are the ones often behind the scenes. Perhaps it is the volunteer organizing meal trains for hurting families, a youth leader pouring into the lives of students, or even the friend who listens and prays with you. Consider some ways that you could acknowledge and encourage their efforts. Text a simple note of gratitude, speak a kind word, or perhaps offer your help in some way to them. Then, consider also how you can be a Phoebe in the places you live, work, and serve. What gifts or resources do you have that could support others?

Our world today often prioritizes fame and recognition. Let us instead follow Jesus' own words in Matthew 20:28, ***“Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve.”*** Let us welcome and support one another. Let us, by God's grace, reflect Christ's love in our actions. Finally, let us strive to create a culture of honor and support within our church, homes, and beyond, ensuring that everyone feels valued and appreciated.

DEVOTION 4
**NO LONE RANGERS
ALLOWED**

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

“Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well.”

Romans 16:3-4

As the book of Romans closes, we see a list of names. I guess I should expect this since it is a letter sent to friends. There would be a number of people one would want to acknowledge. However, it can catch us off guard.

Paul is known as the ultimate missionary. He travels without any personal agenda. He immediately finds opportunities to share the Gospel. Even though he faces multiple distractions and even persecution, he presses forward for the Lord. Yet, in all of this, he is not alone. He is presented as the main character who points others to Jesus, but he is not alone.

In Romans chapter 16, Paul lists some 37 associates who are with him or have served with him in the past. A more thorough study shows that Paul had about 120 fellow servants of the Lord. He was not alone.

In Romans 16:4, Paul uses a simple phrase concerning Prisca and Aquila. He says, ***“I give thanks.”*** Paul realizes he cannot and should not try to do ministry alone. He needs others, and others need him.

I appreciate that Paul feels the thankfulness and expresses it. That is a great lesson in itself. However, I want us to realize that we are

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all needed. I think Henry Ford explains it well, “Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” It reminds me of our mission statement. We start by gathering together as believers, which is designed to point us to Growth Communities. From there, we team up and serve together. Ford used the word “together” three times in a simple statement because that needs to be the focus.

Professional basketball coach Phil Jackson said it this way, “The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.” This may sound bland until you realize that Jackson coached Michael Jordan. He did not just tell the team to get the ball to Michael and sit back and watch. Every player was important and had a role to fill.

In the missionary world, Paul would be considered a Michael Jordan. Like Michael, he had an effective team where each member filled an important role.

What is your role in the church? Please remember, you are needed and appreciated. Thank you!

DEVOTION 5

TWISTED TRUTHS

PASTOR MITCHELL HOLMES

If you know anything about me, you probably know of my love for the “*The Lord of the Rings*” movie trilogy. One character that I love in the films is named Boromir. He is well known as the one who attempts to take the evil Ring of Power from Frodo. I love this character and what we can learn from him in our attempt to resist sin and the corruption of the enemy. Yes, Boromir attempts to take the Ring from Frodo, but not because Boromir is evil; he is misled by the temptation of the Ring and desires to use its power to fight back against the evil army that threatens to take over the world. While he was corrupted and misled, his intentions were good. This is a tactic that the enemy often uses when dealing with servants of the Lord. If we can be tempted by half-truths or enticing lies that may even appear righteous, we might risk being misled away from the truth of God’s Word. This is what is being warned against in our passage for today.

Romans 16:17-20 says, ***“I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.”*** What is being talked about here is the idea that there are deceivers out there that will cause division and attempt to divide God’s people. A strategy that these deceivers may employ is that of enticing language, teaching half-truths, or twisting words and contexts to try and trick the Church into believing a falsehood. It is

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far harder to detect a partial truth that has been twisted to serve a purpose contrary to God because it sounds so close to the truth! This strategy is especially effective if the deception sounds like it may even be righteous and God-honoring!

Notice, in verse 18, the author states that this strategy works on the naïve. A follower of Christ who knows the contents of God's Word well and studies their Bible daily is far harder to deceive than one who only has a surface-level understanding of God's character and expectations of His Church. This is why we are urged in verse 19 to be wise to what is good. If we want to be a useful instrument for the Lord, and we want to avoid the temptations and deceptions of the enemy, we must vigilantly stand on God's Word. We must study it, know it, dwell on it, and ask God to reveal the truth in His Word to us while removing any misconceptions we have about Scripture. A church that does this will see God ***"crush Satan"*** under its feet.

DEVOTION 6

THE GREAT REVEAL

PASTOR KEATON WASHBURN

As we conclude our study of the book of Romans, Paul gives a picture of the Gospel to his readers. In Romans 16:25-27, he says, ***“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith - to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”*** He refers to the Gospel as a ***“mystery that was kept secret for long ages,”*** but now ***“has been made known to all nations.”*** Jon Courson, in his commentary, sheds some light on this usage of the word ***“mystery”*** in saying that it is not something that cannot be figured out, but instead, something that at one time was hidden.

If you have spent much time in the metro Detroit or Flint area, you have probably seen vehicles driving around with parts of them covered up with what looks like huge black and white camouflage stickers. Sometimes, it makes them look like zebras with a black-and-white pattern. I remember asking my dad about this at a young age, and he told me that these were new vehicles out for testing. The stickers made it so that cameras could not capture the actual shape of the new model vehicle before it was to be revealed.

As I think back to that, I see similarities to this mystery that Paul refers to in his conclusion to Romans. Like the designers who created the new model vehicle but are not ready to reveal it yet, so God foreknew the coming of Christ and the revelation of the Gospel through Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

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Paul first refers to this mystery of the Gospel in Romans 11:25, ***“I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.”*** This mystery is that you and I (assuming we are not Jewish) now have an opportunity to be saved through faith in Christ as Gentiles. In Christ, we are grafted into salvation as part of God's glorious redemption plan. All along, God knew what He was doing. He is not only the designer of His plan, but also the sustainer. As Paul concludes, he reminds his readers once again of God's foresight and blueprint all along. Nothing we do is outside of God's sight, and nothing can separate us from Him!

OUR VISION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, “We don’t go to church, we are the Church.” We believe that as God’s people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

The goal of weekend gatherings at The River Church is to glorify Christ in all we do! Whether it be through singing, giving, serving, or any of the variety of ways He has gifted us and called us together, Jesus is at the center of it all. We celebrate that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it’s not only a refresher, it brings life-change!

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***“all things in common.”*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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