

There is something absolutely compelling for me about Romans 12. And so this week and next week I am choosing to use these texts instead of the also compelling stories in Matthew 16 of Jesus first praising Peter for his faith in Jesus, and then the following week calling him Satan. All this will, of course, preach, but I find this really compelling.

If Paul wrote Romans during the winter of 56/57 at Gaius' home, then it is at the end of his third missionary journey, before he takes the offering to Jerusalem. As such, it represents his most mature theology. It is superb rhetoric. Melancthon said it was an overview of Pauline thought. It is said Augustine was converted while reading Romans 13. Chryostom is said to have had it read to him twice a week. If Paul is the greatest of Christian theologians, then Romans is his greatest work. The preacher would do well to preach on it often, if for no other reason, than to become immersed in Pauline thought.

Luther's Preface to the Letter to the Romans begins with these words:

*This letter is truly the most important piece in the New Testament. It is purest Gospel. It is well worth a Christian's while not only to memorize it word for word but also to occupy himself with it daily, as though it were the daily bread of the soul. It is impossible to read or to meditate on this letter too much or too well. The more one deals with it, the more precious it becomes and the better it tastes.*

**Martin Luther (Vorrede auff die Epistel S. Paul: an die Romer.)**

For those who read German, Luther's comments spark the imagination because the same word is used for justification, just, justice and righteousness: *gerecht*. This does something to the text in the mind of the reader, if one can hear, "The justice of God is revealed..." and "Those who are just will live by faith."

Romans can be easily divided into a theological section (chapters 1-8), Paul's defense of the Jews (chapters 9-11) and then his exhortation to the Romans (12-15), with 16 containing his greetings and conclusions. Since the Second Sunday after Pentecost (June 26), we have been marching through Romans, starting with chapter 6. Now we arrive at the exhortation.

My New Testament professor, Walter Taylor, used to speak of Paul's letters as indicative then imperative. First Paul tells us what God has done in Christ. Then he tells the church what this means, and what they need to do in response. Dr. Taylor used to suggest we craft our sermons the same way: first the indicative (what God has done in Christ), then the imperative (what we must do).

A lot of sermons I've heard over the years either do one or the other. When someone just preaches the imperative, it's sermon of law. Do this; don't do that. I hear a lot of these on television. How do live the "Christian" life. On the other hand, well-meaning preachers of gospel run the risk of proclaiming bland platitudes that describe some transaction up in heaven between God and Jesus, and one would think there are no implications. They're afraid to say, "Here's what we have to do folks, if we take this message seriously." Perhaps we're afraid because we don't want to preach law. Or perhaps we're afraid because if we risk dreaming about what God is calling us to do, people will get mad.

In any case, Paul is possessed of no such fear. Therefore, he begins with "Therefore." Whenever you see "therefore" you have to ask what's it there for. Therefore points to something that comes before. So one might summarize what Paul has said to this point:

1. I am not ashamed of the gospel (actually I'm proud), for it is the power of God for salvation...
2. The righteousness of God has been revealed from faith to faith...
3. Abraham had faith, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness...
4. Abraham is the father of a universal religion....
5. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...
6. I myself am caught up in sin, thanks be to Jesus who delivers us from this body of death...
7. The Spirit helps us in our weakness...
8. Everything works for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose...
9. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...
10. There is nothing in all creation that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus...
11. I don't know why my fellow Jews haven't caught on to all of this, but I do know that the covenant and the promises are irrevocable...
12. No one can understand God's ways anyway...
13. His judgments are unsearchable...
14. For from him and through him and for him are all things...

So therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of God's great mercy, here's what we have to do:

1. Offer our bodies as a sacrifice. This is your spiritual worship.
2. Don't conform to the world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.
3. Don't think of yourselves too highly, but rather with sober judgment.
4. Serve according to your gifts.

That's this week, verses 1-8. Then next week we start with verse nine:

1. Love sincerely. Hate evil. Hold fast to what is good.
2. Be devoted to one another.
3. Don't lose your first love.
4. Live in harmony with one another.
5. Associate with the lowly. Don't be conceited.
6. And it goes on to really complex stuff like loving your enemies. It could have come straight out of the Sermon on the Mount.

Paul is offering excellent, deeply spiritual advice for Christian community. This is what the beloved community looks like. It's sacrificial, non-conformist, humble, serving according to the gifts that God has given.

Preach your heart out. I remember singing a very simple anthem by Allen Pote, "Many Gifts. One Spirit." There are many hymns on Spiritual Gifts.

Paul mentions seven specific gifts here, a bit different than the gifts lists 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4:

1. Prophecy
2. Serving
3. Teaching
4. Encouragement
5. Generosity
6. Leadership
7. Mercy

Every gift is important. Are there those who speak prophetically in your church? Don't crucify them. They are saying something you need to hear. I love it that Paul recognizes generosity as a spiritual gift. Everyone can give, but some are wired for outrageous acts of generosity. Can you identify them? I love it that Paul mentions leadership as a spiritual gift. And he says that leaders should lead with diligence. To me that means passion, commitment, foresight, planning, strategy, thoughtfulness. Leaders don't leave things to whim. They're diligent.

This could be a great Sunday to talk about Spiritual Gifts. Studies show healthy churches have a way to deploy people in ministry according to their gifts. Unhealthy churches ask anyone to do anything. Healthy churches find a way to identify people's gifts and get them on the right seat on the bus, to use Stephen Covey's analogy. Spiritual Gifts Inventories are an imperfect science, but it's a foot in the door for getting people to think this way. Why not ask everyone to do one, then collate the results in a spreadsheet.

The next time you need someone to do something, you ask, "What spiritual gifts are required to do this job well?" If it's care you need someone with the gift of encouragement/mercy. If it's behind the scenes organizing you need someone with the gift of serving/helping. If it's church council you need someone with the gift of leadership. If you ask someone with the gift of generosity to be a teacher, you could end up with a train wreck. When people serve according to their gifts they enjoy the work, they'll make bigger sacrifices, they'll do a better job. Everyone wins. Do you have a way to deploy your people according to their gifts?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, don't miss Paul's point. The church is a body. The body has many members, and those members have different functions. We think differently. We act differently. We serve differently. It's supposed to be that way. We are differently abled, but that diversity is an important and precious gift. Respect it. We belong to one another. We are members of one another. Respect those differences. They are critically important to the functioning of the body of Christ.

Thanks for listening, next week we'll pick up with verse 9.

### **Next week**

Last week we started in on Romans 12. We talked about the fact that this section is Paul's ethical exhortations to the church in Rome. He's spent the last eleven chapters talking about this incredible thing that God has done in Christ. Now he's telling the congregations of the Roman church what they need to do about it.

By the way, at our leadership events I've been rehearsing a truth that I think matters for the church. When Paul wrote to the church in Rome, he was writing to a synod. He was writing to a diocese. The church in Rome was a network of house churches. The church in Corinth was a network of house-churches. Paul wrote to the metropolitan church, a cluster of congregations that he consider the primary unit of the church. A synod is not just a necessary organization evil. It is the basic unit of the church.

Last week we heard Paul telling us that the church is a body with different parts that have different functions. We are members of one another. An individual alone is not the church. A congregation alone is not the church. We are the church together. And we are differently-gifted. It's supposed to be that way. Respect this. Don't put down others because they are different. It's supposed to be that way! Paul goes on with some ethical exhortations that help us understand why Coleridge referred to Romans as "the profoundest piece of writing in existence." What follows is right up there with the Sermon on the Mount. You have to know that even though the gospels have not been written, Paul has heard a recap of the Sermon on the Mount. It is echoed in his words. I think the preacher could read them again, very slowly, letting them sink in.

*Let love be genuine;*

*hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good;*

*love one another with mutual affection;*

*outdo one another in showing honour.*

*Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.*

*Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.*

*Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*

*Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*

*Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*

*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'*

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This is not teaching theology, but spirituality. Paul taught theology in the first  $\frac{3}{4}$  of his letter. Now he's telling them how this plays out in the real world.

Perhaps these exhortations could make up the prayers of the church Sunday.

- Good and gracious God. Teach us to love genuinely. (Silence.)
- Let this be a community where we outdo one another in showing honor. (Silence.)
- Teach us to extend hospitality to strangers. (Silence.)

And so on.

This is the mature Christian life in its highest form. If Christians lived like this, the whole world would convert. Lord, give us the strength to love like this.

Or perhaps you could pray together the Prayer of St. Francis.

*Lord, make us instruments of your peace.  
Where there is hatred, let us sow love.  
Where there is injury, pardon.  
Where there is doubt, faith.  
Where there is despair, hope.  
Where there is darkness, light.  
Where there is sadness, joy.  
O Divine Master,  
grant that we may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love.  
For it is in giving that we receive.  
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.  
Amen.*

### **The Following Week**

<sup>8</sup> Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. <sup>9</sup> The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,”<sup>[a]</sup> and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>10</sup> Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Matt 18