

Romans 12:1-2 A Right Relationship with God

Introduction

‘Nous sommes Charlie’, a million plus people (or many of them!) were reported as chanting in the streets of Paris, and in particular in the Place de la Republique, on Sunday 11 January 2015. In total it was estimated that 3.7 million French people marched in different cities across the nation. On line many people were tweeting or sending tags or similar communications that declared: ‘Je Suis Charlie’! On the internal Scottish Baptist pastors e-network a number were debating whether it was appropriate or accurate for Christians to identify with the ‘Je Suis Charlie’ campaign. What was it that caused this remarkable phenomenon that on that winter’s day in Paris brought forty-six world leaders to march at the head of a procession - a group that included both Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, and Benjamin Netanyahu the Israeli Prime Minister? Bitter rivals in French politics President Hollande and his predecessor Nicolas Sarkozy appeared to be good friends for the occasion as if something had changed. In case there is someone here who missed the news story a small staunchly secular satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* had roused the indignation of fanatical Islamists, for printing a cartoon about the Muslim prophet Muhammed, who attacked both its offices (and interestingly an unrelated Jewish supermarket as well which revealed the growing anti-semitism in France), which led to seventeen people losing their lives. The drama and trauma involved captivated the nation of France, leading *The Times* newspaper on Monday 12 January to provide the accurate summary headline ‘United we Stand’.

In the book of Romans prior to chapter twelve the apostle Paul has placed a primary emphasis on teaching the doctrinal foundations of our faith. He has explained that in the presence of a holy God we, whether Jews or Gentiles, have fallen short of His standards through our sinful thoughts, words and actions. He pointed out that even Abraham the great figure revered by Jews, Christians and Muslims needed to be saved by faith alone, through God’s grace alone. He has explained how we all can only be justified freely by God’s grace as a result of Jesus’ substitutionary sacrifice in our place. Although through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit we can live a victorious Christian life we will also face a life-long battle with our inner sinful nature as we seek to become more like Jesus. Yet as Paul outlined in the last section of Romans eight we can have absolute confidence in how things will ultimately turn out because God’s will must be done on earth as it is in heaven and nothing can separate us from His amazing love. In Romans chapters one to eight the apostle addresses both Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles); however, he spends the next three chapters addressing a particular issue that was hotly debated in his day (and sadly in some Christian circles in ours today as well). He makes it very plain that God has not finished with the Jewish people and will bring an increasing believing remnant in the last days to Himself and bless a restored Israel as a nation in its land even if many of its people, as in Old Testament days do not place their faith and trust in the Lord. Now in the closing part of this lengthy letter Paul once again will address all believers of whatever background with a reinforcement of the practical application of the gospel message he has explained. All Christians should be united in living in the way he will describe in Romans 12-15, prior to the personal greetings in Romans chapter sixteen.

1. The people to whom these words apply (Romans 12:1)

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters... There is no doubt that there have been tensions in the Early Church at that time between some of the Jewish believers and some of the Gentile ones. In the book of Acts and Galatians in particular we have very clear evidence of the kinds of issues that had been the cause of the differences. What the apostle wanted to do in this letter was to spell out very clearly once and for all the continuing place the Jewish people and Israel had in God's purposes, together with the equally clear place Gentile believers had in the Christian Church. We are brothers and sisters in Christ together. We are saved in exactly the same way through the sacrifice of Jesus in our place. The time for animal sacrifices in the Temple being our means of atonement is over. The book of Hebrews explains this in considerable detail. The way we are to live as believers in terms of core convictions and lifestyle choices is also the same. The apostle will outline in the next four chapters of Romans what this will look like in practice with some general examples. However, believers also have freedom to make choices based on heritage, culture and other forms of identity in the living out of our faith. Jewish believers, for example, are free to observe festivals and feasts and live by their historic dietary practices, if they wish, but they are not required by the Gospel. Gentiles and Jews who follow Jesus must be gracious in recognising one another as truly their brothers and sisters in the faith. That is seeking to emphasise what we have in common much more than highlighting our differences. We have to be honest that Christians over the centuries have been poor at doing that. One of the worst contemporary examples of that today is in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, one of the two places claimed as the site of the death and burial of Jesus (the other is the 'Place of the Skull' and the nearby Garden Tomb outside the city walls). Here different Catholic and Orthodox denominations have their own marked bit of the Church for their services. A few years ago there was a dispute between two groups of monks over the areas for which they had responsibility for cleaning. It made the lead story on World News and at one level was amusing, seeing men with long beards in ornate clerical robes bashing each other in the Church with broomsticks. But at another level it was horrifying –what kind of witness to the Gospel was that? The problem is that it is not simply an historic issue. There are Evangelical Christians who will not sit at the Lord's Table with fellow Evangelical believers. Scotland's Presbyterian divisions have been legendary, but Baptists too are not without faults. I attended a gathering of Baptists in the USA in 2012 that was intended (amongst other purposes) to bring representatives of different American Baptist networks together on one particular campus. It was great to see some individuals from bodies I had only read about in books, but sad that other better known groups that prided themselves on their ecumenicity that stayed away. There is no network of Churches or denomination that does not have to hold up its hand at times because of its failure to truly recognise and work with fellow believers. We rejoice that great steps have been made in inter-church relations in recent decades, but at its most important level in the local community is where the greatest impact is made. It begins in each local congregation where followers of Jesus will seek to build friendships with people of different ages as well as their own; will endeavour to get to know newer people so that each one hopefully can begin to settle in our midst. But it only happens if we go about it in an intentional way. However relationships are always two-ways. Proverbs 18:24a (NKJV) reminds us: *A man who has friends must himself be friendly...* It is true in a marriage; in a workplace or social setting. No relationship has ever attained its full potential there is always room for further growth and enrichment. In the Church of Jesus Christ visitors to a congregation ought to see evidence of that practical love and care between its members –not least because we are seeking to be the ambassadors of the King of Kings who want to give the right impression of the character of our Lord and Saviour.

2. The basis of Paul's appeal to them (Romans 12:1)

...in view of God's mercy...Paul actually uses a plural word here *mercies* because it is likely that he has in mind the wide-ranging generosity of God towards us as His children. It is a strong appeal the apostle is making because presumably there have been problems which have led to ties between some of them to become strained and less loving than they ought to have been. It is as if Paul is saying take a step back from thinking hard thoughts about some brothers and sisters in Christ and look to the Lord and the basis on which He has welcomed you into His family. None of us was accepted into God's family because we were so good that we couldn't possibly be left out! There was a uniform plight in that *All had sinned and fallen short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23). The story of Jesus that illustrates this point so well is that of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32: *Jesus continued: 'There was a man who had two sons.¹² The younger one said to his father, "Father, give me my share of the estate." So he divided his property between them.¹³ Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.¹⁴ After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need.¹⁵ So he went and hired himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs.¹⁶ He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.¹⁷ When he came to his senses, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death!¹⁸ I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.¹⁹ I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants."²⁰ So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms round him and kissed him.²¹ The son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son."²² But the father said to his servants, "Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet.²³ Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.²⁴ For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found." So they began to celebrate.²⁵ Meanwhile, the elder son was in the field. When he came near the house, he heard music and dancing.²⁶ So he called one of the servants and asked him what was going on.²⁷ "Your brother has come," he replied, "and your father has killed the fattened calf because he has him back safe and sound."²⁸ The elder brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him.²⁹ But he answered his father, "Look! All these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends.³⁰ But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!"³¹ "My son," the father said, "you are always with me, and everything I have is yours.³² But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'" The Father in the story is God is the father in the story –but which son is the prodigal? Which son has missed what the 'mercies of God' should signify to the one who calls God their heavenly father? Are we willing to welcome someone who in this world's terms has 'failed' in their life into our midst? Are we willing to accept like God does here a fellow believer who has failed in some way but is now returning to their father? The natural human reaction is maybe a cautious tolerance, but the Gospel requires a greater generosity from other recipients of the mercies of God. This deeply challenging appeal from the apostle is an issue in every generation of Christians because each of us individually and collectively needs a constant reminder of the basis on which we were accepted into God's family. Romans 11:30-31 has stated: ³⁰ Just as **you** who were at one time disobedient to God **have now received mercy** as a result of their disobedience, ³¹ so they too have now become disobedient **in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you.** ³² For God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that **He may have mercy on them all.** When I want to think*

hard thoughts about a brother or sister –and almost all of us will do that at some time or other, remember says Paul the basis of your own acceptance by God –*in view of God’s mercy...*

3. The commitments Paul expects (Romans 12:1-2)

What then are the implications of what Paul has been saying for your daily lives?

(a) The dedication of our bodies (Romans 12:1)

... to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. It is very interesting that the last few words of Romans 12:1 can be translated as *your reasonable service* or *your spiritual worship*. In biblical thought the degree of overlap between these two translations is far greater than we often imagine. As human beings we like to compartmentalise things and mentally at least put them in ‘separate boxes’. Yet God views us as whole persons. In Evangelical Christian vocabulary sometimes in speaking of evangelism someone may describe it as ‘soul-winning’ and ‘saving souls’; although these words are correct because beyond this life we will get new resurrection bodies, it can convey a completely mistaken idea that God is not interested in us as whole persons. In the first century AD Greek thought that was dominant in the Gentile world downplayed the significance of the body; some in the Platonic tradition even saw the body as an embarrassing encumbrance! As a result they downplayed how people used their bodies. They could be horrified at intellectually faulty ideas but be disinterested in sexual immorality, even in what we would consider not only improper relationships but also blatant sexual abuse of others whether minors or others in their spheres of influence. The Church at Corinth that probably had a majority of its members from this pagan cultural background brought this kind of faulty thinking into the church. In I Corinthians 5 Paul highlighted a particular case of immorality within their ranks with which they had no problem, but the apostle was firm in demanding that action should be taken to remedy the situation. In summary Paul explained his position in I Corinthians 5:9-11: *I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people –¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world.¹¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with **anyone who claims to be a brother or sister** but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.* In other words how we care for and use our bodies is important to God. Paul has already touched on this application of the gospel of grace in Romans 6:12-14: *Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.¹³ Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness.¹⁴ For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.* Do we ever stop and reflect on what Paul has actually said here? It would have been a shock to many Gentile readers in the first century AD. Part of our Christian service / our offering of worship relates to how we respect and care for our bodies. We must eat and drink in moderation and to the best of our ability in a balanced diet because otherwise we might become more vulnerable to contracting certain health conditions. Our bodies are a gift from God and although we must not be obsessive about appearance we have a responsibility to take care of them. We may not have any interest in competitive sport but some level of regular exercise is important for basic levels of fitness. We honour God with respect to holding to high moral standards and are unashamed to uphold the biblical boundaries for sexual intimacy. In Western societies sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) are at record levels. God is not a kill-joy He knows that wrong behavioural choices are not risk free. For every case of HIV/AIDS there are many

more where SIDs have contributed significantly to the increasing problems of infertility, and the heartache that can bring to many couples. Yet Paul in the list he cites in I Corinthians 5 is not exclusively concerned with sexual mores, he includes issues of greed, for example. How does this translate into our materialistic culture. What does enough look like? He lists idolatry- that is something with which we are more excited and engrossed in than living for God. He raises slander, the misuse of the tongue. A person who wilfully is trashing someone else's reputation and unwilling to apologise when asked by their local congregation. Would a local church exercise discipline there as quickly as for an offence of sexual immorality? He also highlights substance abuse and a breach of business ethics. ¹¹ *But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler.* The Gospel is a holistic one that covers the whole of life.

Paul's language here is that of priestly service of individuals who in response to God's mercy and grace to them are willing to exercise self-discipline in each area of their lives so as to be offering worship to God. However, this priestly service is not conducted in a temple or church building but in our homes, our workplace, maybe a local sports centre or out in the countryside. It is not an either /or doing this instead of gathering with God's people at church on a Sunday or whenever through the week, but as a complementary aspect of the quality life God intends for us as His people. It might help someone struggling with an addiction issue, or a self-image issue or merely a self-control issue to grasp that each little victory is acceptable to God as part of our *reasonable service* or as a *spiritual act of worship*. In I Timothy 4:8 Paul wrote: *For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.* Almost certainly after watching the athletic competitors in the Corinthians Games in his reflections the apostle wrote: *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.* ²⁵ *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.* ²⁶ *Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.* ²⁷ *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.* (I Corinthians 9:24-27). May God help us honour Him to the best of our ability with our bodies.

(b) **The dedication of our minds** (Romans 12:2) *Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* As spiritual beings we have bodies but also rational faculties as well. Paul challenges these Christians to offer this aspect of their identity to God as well. J.B. Phillips, the Anglican minister and Bible translator was well known for his paraphrase of this verse: *Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its mould, but let God remould your minds from within.* What Paul has in mind is much more substantial than simply agreeing on a list of 'do's' and 'don'ts'. The problem with this well-intended approach is that the list will never be long enough! What may begin as a short list will inevitably increase as time goes by, but it will not deal with the underlying issue. In Mark 9:43-48 Jesus uttered some words that at first glance appear to be shocking: *If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.* ⁴⁵ *And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life crippled than to have two feet and be thrown into hell.* ⁴⁷ *And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell,* ⁴⁸ *where "the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched."* Was he really advocating limb-chopping as some extremists in certain African and Islamic countries have practised in recent years? No! certainly not! Its point was that if we have a problem we need to deal with the root cause. Chopping off a thief's hand doesn't deal with the fact that his mind had come to the conviction that thieving was acceptable conduct for him. The limb that

carried out the action was only following the instructions determined by his brain! The surgery proposed in these verses is not radical enough- if physical amputation is the appropriate way to solve the problem! In Mark 7 Jesus explained this point in some detail to His disciples. In Mark 7:14-15 He made this statement: *Again Jesus called the crowd to Him and said, 'Listen to Me, everyone, and understand this.¹⁵ Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.'* Later He explained further to the disciples in Mark 7:20-23: *He went on: 'What comes out of a person is what defiles them.²¹ For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder,²² adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly.²³ All these evils come from inside and defile a person.'* How do we address this kind of problem?

In his novel *1984* George Orwell feared a Big Brother society that would control access to knowledge and information certainly banning the reading of books. Around the same time Aldous Huxley wrote an equally perceptive work *Brave New World* in which he visualised societies of people happy to embrace their oppression and adoring the technologies that kept them in bondage. In such a setting there was no reason to ban books because no-one wanted to read them! He saw a society centred on trivialities and entertainment. More recently we have seen film adaptations of Suzanne Collin's novel *The Hunger Games* that raises some similar questions about the world in which we live, despite being set in a disturbing future world. Its popularity at the box office suggests that its message has struck a chord with many people, in addition to being recognised as a well-produced film. Paul here has challenged his readers not to go along with the pagan mindset around them instead to *be transformed by the renewing of your mind.* This Greek word (metamorphosis) captures the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. It is a word used in the Gospels at the **transfiguration** of Jesus (Mark 9:2), but it is also found in II Corinthians 3:18 with reference to Christians. II Corinthians 3:18 states: *And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.* Is this not extraordinary that this is God's plan for your life and mine! However, it will not happen by accident only as we under the enabling power of the Holy Spirit are enabled to discipline our minds to have a pattern of thinking that increasingly reflects Jesus' approach to life in our generation. Paul reminded the Christians in Ephesus of this issue in these words in Ephesians 4:22-24: *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires;²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds;²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.*

(c) **The dedication of our will** (Romans 12:2) *Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – His good, pleasing and perfect will.* How is it possible that our whole person, body and rational faculties are conforming to Him? It requires intentionality, the dedication of our wills. It will take strenuous effort at times on our part to make the right choices when other people have other priorities. It will also at times mean taking the harder path when an easier one would have been preferred. However, at such times we are walking in the footsteps of our Lord and Saviour in Gethsemane who declared in Luke 22:42: *'Father, if You are willing, take this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.'* This is the secret of having a right relationship with God. May God help us by His Spirit demonstrate these words in Romans 12:1-2 in our daily lives, for Jesus' sake, Amen.