

Romans 12:3-8 A Right View of Ourselves

Introduction

Questions about our identity, our place in society and what the future might hold for us are pressing matters for many people. The issues have become increasingly complex in our country because there are more contested boundaries for what we believe, how we behave and what our aims or ambitions ought to be. I have occasionally read articles in the press from some of the pioneers of the Women's' Liberation Movement, for example, that have expressed disillusionment concerning how little they think has been accomplished; openly raising questions about where society is going at the present time. As Christians we rightly affirm many of their questions that wish to challenge the lack of respect and dignity for others, that address much deeper issues than just banning, for example, the 'page 3 pictures' in *The Sun* newspaper ! As Christians our approach to this subject begins by recognising that we are created in the image of God. Genesis 1:27-28 prior the first human beings on earth God set out His agenda for us: *So God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them. 28 God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.'* Respect for ourselves and respect for other people are the foundations on which relationships are built. A person lacking a right view of themselves or failing to value and appreciate the necessary contributions of other people in their lives will accomplish comparatively little of real value in their lives. In the former case to see ourselves as someone who can achieve very little in life can often result in withdrawal from serious attempts to find work or engage effectively with other people. A person in this position needs to be reminded that if Genesis 1:27 is correct then their life is both important and significant; that God has given them gifts to use not only for their benefit but also for the good of other people. The question such a person needs to discern is what my gifts are and how can I use them most effectively at the present time. It is no use getting discouraged about what isn't possible; instead to concentrate on what opportunities are available. By contrast there are other people whose mindset is focussed on 'me' and 'my needs' (wants!); they fail to grasp that God has created us as social creatures who accomplish far more by working together with other people in so many contexts –not just within a local Christian Church. However, sadly most of us can easily think of professing Christians who fall into both these categories who need to have their minds renewed by the Holy Spirit in order to become the woman or man God intends them to be. Romans 12:1-2 outlines the mindset of a child of God who can be an effective witness for the Lord by their deeds and their words in the world.

1. Our Character (Romans 12:3)

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. Paul begins right away with challenging these believers in the capital city of the Empire to have a correct view of themselves. There are two fundamental errors to avoid as I have already indicated. (a) **Too high a view of ourselves** An American pastor reported the interesting conversation of a Christian with a good friend. This man wanted to impress upon his colleague how spiritual he was as he sought to grow in humility. He remarked to his friend: 'Will you pray for me that I might be nothing.' His friend wisely remarked in response: 'You are nothing, brother. Take it by faith.' [James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, Vol.4, p. 1565] Paul in Romans 7:18 has already explained that we are imperfect beings because of our

innate sinfulness, that is thinking, speaking or acting in a manner inconsistent with God's guidance for our lives. Therefore, in the light of such self-knowledge we ought to be gracious towards other imperfect people and not see ourselves as superior individuals. In God's kingdom there is no social hierarchy. Christians can see themselves as superior in terms of biblical knowledge or theological soundness; possessing a good grasp of Scriptural teaching and holding to an orthodox view of the faith is vitally important but it may be that we have been privileged to grow up in a Christian family or a good church family where God's Word was well taught in services, Sunday School and youth groups, and other people less fortunate than us in terms of prior opportunities. Others will have the same issue but it may be a status issue of looking less favourably on people lower in a religious hierarchy. For other people it can be an inflated attitude based on educational opportunities or qualifications. Some people see themselves as superior to believers who lived in a former century as if we had greater abilities in knowing God's will and truth than them. For others, it can be a pride over which spiritual gift someone else has or hasn't got. The list is endless but the sin nature within us can take the best of things and cause us sometimes to look down on other people. The Church at Corinth in particular had problems in this area. Paul wrote these words of advice to them in I Corinthians 1:26-29: *Brothers and sisters think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: **'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'*** (b) **Too low a view of ourselves** The opposite error some people make is to think they have nothing to offer. In the worst cases to view themselves as worthless and become paralysed into inactivity thinking there is nothing they can do and that they possess no gifts that God can use. We are special because of God's amazing love for us in Jesus. In I John 3:2 John wrote: *See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!* (c) **A right view of ourselves** (Romans 12:3) (i) **With sober judgement** Here is the invitation to think carefully of our position in Christ as children of God. If I have been created in the image of God then I am special! I have no right to ignore the calling God has given me to be the best I can be to His glory here on earth. I am also filled with the Spirit of God. If Romans 8:37 is true (*...in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*) then through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit I can accomplish anything He asks me to do through His resources. In more general terms God has a plan for my life. I may only know in general terms what that means but I will trust to Him each day of my life and ask Him to guide my steps. We are special to God the Father because of Jesus who died in our place on the cross and who will do what it takes to bring us home to be with Him for ever. (ii) **With the faith entrusted to us** sometimes we have a strong faith; at other times our hold on God is very weak. Imagine God standing with us as His child at the side of a busy road contemplating crossing it. Whose grip on the other will be stronger? Exactly the same if you are a parent with your young child. Paul has already in Romans 11:29 reminded his readers that: *God's gifts and His call are irrevocable.* Our faith is in a great God who keeps His promises - that is the issue- not how big is our faith. He never fails!

2. **Our Conduct** (Romans 12:4-5)

(a) **Unity: there is one body 'The Church'**⁴ *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.* There were a number of recurring problems

in the Early Church that the Apostle Paul repeatedly had to tackle. One of these issues was the nature of the Church as the body of Christ. The Church at Corinth was seriously affected in its common meals and Communion observance through social class divisions that verged on the scandalous. The strong language Paul uses in I Corinthians 11 shows how bad the problems were. However, his laying out how to observe communion has been so beneficial for Christian congregations in later centuries. The largest part of I Corinthians 12 was spent in emphasising the unity of the Body of Christ. All members are equally necessary for it to be complete. All have something to give and all have something to receive from one another. There were further problems in that congregation over some members viewing their more dramatic spiritual gifts as superior to those given by God to other Christians so Paul has to spell out in the grammatical equivalent of bold type that people are all given different gifts (I Corinthians 12:29-30). Here much more briefly the apostle will describe the unity of the church and then give a list of spiritual gifts in the church. It doesn't take too much insight to note the different gifts listed here compared with the I Corinthians 12 list. Then in Ephesians 4 in a longer and considered section of that letter Paul will stress the oneness of believers in Christ in the Church. Listen to what he wrote. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* ⁴*There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called;* ⁵*one Lord, one faith, one baptism;* ⁶*one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all* (Ephesians 4:3-5). The unity of the body must be a given. Notice how often Paul emphasises *one*... Reading between the lines there was clearly an issue in at least some of these Early Churches. How do we strengthen our unity with fellow believers? Make a point each Sunday of seeking to speak to someone you don't know very well so that gradually you can get to know more people and know others better; in addition, to conversing with the people we are already friends with. A number of people over the years have sought to join rotas or other forms of ministry as one way of getting to know more people. We can invite people for coffee or a meal or one of the best ways of all is to use the Church Directory as a Prayer list and pray for people. If you are praying for people you are investing in their lives. Over a period of time if you use this method you will cover the vast majority of people who regularly attend here. It is these little things that make a much bigger difference than we ever imagined. The steps we take to build unity within a church also have an application with reference to other churches. Our local Church could never be the totality of God's kingdom on earth –to say that is to realise the absurdity of such a notion. Therefore, how do we connect with other churches? We can again pray for them which is foundational, but in different ways we can work with other congregations on projects or jointly fund initiatives, for example. I thank God for some of the local initiatives that have taken place over the years in Broughty Ferry; I also rejoice at the joint initiatives Dundee Evangelical Alliance affiliated congregations have developed across our city; 'Christians Against Poverty'; 'Eagle Wings' work amongst the homeless; Rock Street Chaplains and many more ventures making a difference in our communities.

(b) **Diversity: there are different expressions of 'The Church'** At the heart of healthy church life is Christian unity as a foundational principle. However, God has created us with different preferences and interests in a whole variety of things. This is good because between us all there is the potential for many things being covered! This is true in practical gifts in handling fabric matters; in working the sound desk or musical gifts or many other leadership or pastoral or ministry callings in God's work here; yet there are also preferences important to us but matters of indifference to God. If we are truly worshipping God from the heart in spirit and in truth it doesn't matter whether a church is singing only metrical Psalms, only traditional hymns or only the latest contemporary songs or a mixture of these or some other combination! We could go round a variety of things in church life and admit that we may

have personal preferences but that another Christian might make different choices to us. In heaven there will be no differences between us all; but this side of heaven God has allowed His children to hold differing convictions about many theological and practical matters, but where there is common ground on fundamental matters we ought to honour the right for Christians to hold differing views especially on secondary matters of belief. Unity within diversity can be a struggle at times, but if we are God's new community of faith through Jesus (Ephesians 2:11-22) then people outside our ranks ought to see that our faith is lived out in practice in fellowship with one another. I am not pretending for a moment that there are not difficult issues to wrestle with in how we work this out amongst real people in a local setting, but we must do everything in our power to show the practical basis of our Christian convictions. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* (Ephesians 4:3) is Paul's clarion call to every individual Christian and every local congregation and every network of Christian congregations. It never happens by chance it takes real efforts to succeed in this work. Will we make the effort for Jesus sake?

3. **Our Calling** (Romans 12:6-8)

⁶ *We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.* Unity and diversity can be worked out in our handling of spiritual gifts. We must recognise that God treats us as individuals and gifts us accordingly. Let us celebrate each others gifts –as well as our own, but also offer to use them for God's glory. Sometime we discover an unexpected gifting when we have volunteered for something because an extra person is required and we see God's blessing on our contribution. However, when we hear of needs in ministry teams do we pray 'Lord please fill this vacancy and if it is through me help me to sense Your leading in this direction. This is a dangerous form of praying! Here Paul highlights seven spiritual gifts that he commends to the Christian community in Rome. No listing of spiritual gifts in the New Testament is the model; each gift listing in different letters of Paul, for example, is illustrative of the range of blessings and callings God directs His people to adopt in His service.

(a) **The gift of prophecy** *If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your [Gk the] faith;* in Ephesians 2:20 prophets together with apostles were foundational to the Church and had a unique authority in the first generation Church, not too dissimilar to Old Testament prophets in that community of faith. Peter, in II Peter 1:19-21, described this particular ministry. *We also have the prophetic message as something completely reliable, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts.* ²⁰ *Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things.* ²¹ *For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.* Biblical prophets were engaged in forth-telling about current affairs from God's perspective at least as much as fore-telling God's plans for the future. Too many people have claimed the title over the years but not shown the fruit of such a calling in their ministries. In the Early Church these individuals were like the apostles primarily itinerant ministries not local church ones. But in a local context some one or some persons who could take God's Word and apply it their contemporary society was an invaluable asset. The NIV rendering of the last few words of this statement: *then prophesy in accordance with your faith* has had two main interpretations. Some have seen it as a reference to the subjective faith of the person who has got up to speak, but this is unlikely to have been Paul's meaning because *faith* has the definite article in front of it and accordingly should be translated *in accordance with the faith* (L.L. Morris, *Romans*, pp. 440-441). This fits with the guidance from Paul (in I Corinthians 14:29) and John (I John 4:1-6) about testing whether these visiting speakers truly were speaking God's message or

whether it was their own ideas being promoted. In the years prior to the availability of the written New Testament Scriptures the prophets played a central role in many of these congregations. However, this foundational pioneering ministry became significantly less prominent in the second and third generations of the Early Church as Pastor-teachers (sometimes called Bishops) together with elders and deacons were established as leadership teams in local congregations.

(b) **The gift of serving** ⁷ *if it is serving, then serve*; this term as used by Paul is a generic one that covers an incredibly wide range of ministry opportunities conducted in Jesus' name. The actual Greek word is διακονία from which we get the English word 'deacon', but in this context Paul is not describing an office to which some members of a local church have been called, rather he is seeking to recognise a spiritual gifting that can sometimes be overlooked. All of us can do most forms of service, but some people are much better at it than others; some are more naturally hospitable or instinctively sensitive to carry out behind-the-scenes acts of kindness. Attempts to narrow down this calling by some Bible commentators are unsuccessful because Paul is deliberately seeking to honour so many forms of service done in Jesus' name and recognising it as a spiritual gifting. Service is by definition practical not theoretical; although it is not always easy to find the words to express it we all know that some people are more naturally talented in one form of service than another. It is unnecessary to agonise over whether these qualities are natural ones that the Holy Spirit enhances or whether they surface as a result of the Spirit's work in our lives. We are invited to serve the Lord through serving other people using who we are and the abilities we possess for their good and His glory.

(c) **The gift of teaching** *if it is teaching, then teach*; hearing this word we instinctively think of the members of our church family with this professional educational calling in our schools, colleges and universities. To survive in that environment today you certainly need a calling with a skill set that includes an ability to teach and maintain order in the classroom. However, in an age where the vast majority of people did not go to school in the Graeco-Roman world and formal education was for the very few the apostle here while not excluding professional teachers has a more generic gifting in mind here. We thank God for those with professional training who work in teaching our children, young people, home groups or maybe even in one-to-one discipleship ministries, but other people whose week-day working life may be in a very different sphere may also make a significant contribution to our church family life as teachers in one capacity or another. Again here Paul has a more generic view in mind of teaching in this reference and covers the range of teaching opportunities in presenting God's Word in age specific ways as we help one another grow in our understanding of the faith and in the application of it to our lives.

(d) **The gift of encouragement** *if it is to encourage, then give encouragement*; Praise the Lord for this gift! Life can be really tough! Some of you I know have been struggling just to get through the daily routine this last week and in many other weeks. The thought of starting another new working week does not fill you with a great sense of anticipation because you know how exhausting it will be. In Paul's day the majority of the congregation were enslaved people –no wonder they needed encouragement to maintain their dignity often under the most demeaning of circumstances. I do not believe once again that these words here are to the few but to the many. Can I encourage each one of you not to leave church on any given Sunday without seeking to encourage at least one other person sat near you or standing near you over tea and coffee in the hall. All of us need encouragement and I have yet to find someone who feels their quota for the day had been exceeded and need to tell others to stop because they cannot take any more of it! You could be God's special blessing to someone who inside is really hurting or struggling with life. In the Bible we are exhorted to *carry each other's burdens*

and in this way fulfil the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). I am so encouraged when I see the level of pastoral care that goes on in this congregation behind the scenes. I rejoice greatly in what is accomplished by the pastoral team, but also other people whose ministries of practical encouragement make such a difference in supporting others through the challenges they may face. Endeavour each week to be an encourager. I (and probably you also) have met some people who on the surface appear to believe they have a gift of discouragement as they spend their time finding fault with the contributions of others. May God spare us from such giftings! and instead make us like Paul's colleague Barnabas, as encouragers of God's people (Acts 11:22-26, for example).

(e) **The gift of giving** *if it is giving, then give generously*; once again it appears to be a generic gifting that is deliberately left open to describe an attitude of mind towards other people that will include in different contexts the donation of finances, our time, our skills; it maybe a one-off act of assistance that takes minutes or a repeated form of support that may have a degree of regularity week by week; there are so many different forms it could take that to endeavour to list its range would be to limit its potential. We might suggest that Paul is seeking to direct these Christians to grasp the kind of people we ought to be towards one another. Looking for opportunities to bless other people in which most of the time will be through little acts of kindness. Too often we can make a mistake in thinking that only big contributions count. There are Christians who have engaged in random appropriate acts of kindness to strangers for the sheer pleasure of observing someone's reaction afterwards!

(f) **The gift of leadership** *if it is to lead, do it diligently*; the word used here by Paul is not that of formal offices in the Church or any other agency, rather what he has in mind is a person inviting others to join them in acts of service. So here, for example, it may be someone inviting others to share with them in a service in a residential home or organising a rota of lifts to church or in some way or other taking the initiative to contribute to the lives of others by the diligent exercise of some duty or other. It may include a more structured form of leadership in a prayer group or home fellowship, but the apostle is emphasising here a functional form of leadership rather than referring to a formal office to which someone may be set apart in the church family.

(g) **The gift of mercy** *if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully* (Romans 12:3-8). There is a link back to verse one *...in view of God's mercy...* God through His amazing grace has joyfully blessed us so we also ought to exercise the same attitude to others first in the church family but then towards others outside it. We are exhorted not to do this work grudgingly but with joy on our faces and in our hearts! Outrageous generosity like the gift of the Panmurefield premises are inevitably exceptional acts not routine ones, but on a smaller level looking to encourage and support one another can enrich our fellowship and our lives in a significant measure. How might you bless someone this week? Give prayerful thought to that as an attitude of heart and mind week by week.

In summary, Paul is urging Christians whose minds have been renewed by the Holy Spirit to exercise a disposition that shows to one another and those outside the church something of the quality of life to which God has called us to live. Having a right view of ourselves of course is in the context of our relationships with other people. In a society where increasing numbers of people are struggling to gain a quality of life experience there is an opportunity for us to be a blessing to others in Jesus' name, Amen.