

Romans 12:9-16 A right relationship with other people, especially in God's family

Introduction

Paul has highlighted gifts that he desired the Roman Christians to use in Romans 12:4-8, but then moves on to speak of character qualities that are desirable in the people who will be exercising gifts in the service of God in this local congregation. It has been noted by a number of Bible commentators that there are similarities here between Paul's words in Romans 12 and his fuller attention to this subject in I Corinthians 12-13. In essence, the apostle wants to stress that a person can have all the gifts in the world but if the individual in question is not motivated by genuine love for God and for His people then anything they attempt will accomplish significantly less than might otherwise have been accomplished. On a completely different stage in Iraq over the last year the world has witnessed how a relatively small motivated Islamist army swept aside the numerically much larger and better equipped Iraqi army, especially in the Sunni-majority provinces of the country. On the outside it should have been impossible because the Americans in particular had been training the national army for years. However, what appeared to be going well on the outside showed with hindsight to be at best a superficial state of affairs. In the secular world what is on the outside presented to others is what matters most. However, that is not how God views people. In I Samuel chapter sixteen there is an account of the prophet Samuel going to Bethlehem to choose a successor to Saul as King over Israel. He is directed by God to go to Bethlehem and anoint one of the sons of Jesse as the next monarch. In most families today that would be a limited choice but Jesse and his wife had a large family. Interestingly when informed of Samuel's mission he arranged for seven sons in turn to meet with Samuel. After making a wrong assumption that God had in mind Eliab, the eldest son, because he was a serving soldier in the army and possibly had the best 'CV' of work experience in the family, it turns into a bit of a procession. At the end of that passage Samuel asked Jesse: *Are these all the sons you have?* *'There is still the youngest,' Jesse answered. 'He is tending the sheep.'* Samuel said, *'Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives.'* (I Samuel 16:11) Both the father and the man of God had made a big mistake in overlooking the criteria God had in mind and Jesse in particular made a wrong call in assuming that it couldn't be the youngest of his boys that God wanted to use. What was the key issue here? *The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the looks at the heart* (I Samuel 16:7). God saw that David alone had the potential to fulfil this role. It comes back to us in this generation. Who you are, that is the kind of character qualities you possess, is more important than what you do for God. It is a serious challenge not to neglect our personal investment in our walk with God. None of us would find it acceptable for a dirty cup being placed in front of us at a restaurant table. We would be even more concerned if the waitress or waiter remarked that it was clean on the outside! It would be our settled conviction that it was more important for the inside of the cup to be clean –if we were going to accept a drink! What is on the inside will eventually have a significant impact on our conduct. Living in relationship with other people in the way God intends us to do is only sustainable in the long term if we feed our inner person with good wholesome spiritual resources. In the remainder of Romans 12 Paul first has in mind our relationship with other believers and with other people of good will towards us in Romans 12:9-16, prior to our relationship with or towards people who are either our enemies or who have settled negative feelings about us in Romans 12:17-21. What does Paul highlight in our relationships with other people, especially within God's family?

1. The foundations for our relationships (Romans 12:9)

(a)**Sincerity** *Love must be sincere* (Romans 12:9a) Every day, although registered with the telephone preference service, I get phone calls making all kinds of offers that are supposedly for my good. Most of you will have the same frustrating experience. The short list of categories of these calls, many of which are computer generated, is highly predictable. When a sales representative comes on the line, for the umpteenth time like me you may have had repeated reassurances that your name is being taken off their list, but deep down you know that the words of the call will be repeated many more times in coming days! It seems that sincerity is in short supply! However, in our relationships with one another our conversations and conduct must not be like those sales calls I have mentioned. Our intentions in communicating who we are and the faith we profess must be genuine and with integrity. The word Paul uses for *love* is *αγαπε*. This is the word associated with love reflecting that shown to us by Jesus and is describing practical service rather than emotional feelings. The latter may not be excluded, but the emphasis is certainly on care in action towards a person who would benefit from assistance offered by another person. In I Corinthians 13:1-7, Paul wrote: *If I could speak all the languages of earth and of angels, but didn't love others, I would only be a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I had the gift of prophecy, and if I understood all of God's secret plans and possessed all knowledge, and if I had such faith that I could move mountains, **but didn't love others, I would be nothing.** ³ If I gave everything I have to the poor and even sacrificed my body, I could boast about it; but if I didn't love others, I would have gained nothing. ⁴ Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud ⁵ or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged. ⁶ It does not rejoice about injustice but rejoices whenever the truth wins out. ⁷ Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.* Here in Romans 12:9 Paul truncates his thinking on this point to two brief statements about this practical love and care towards other people. The first statement is this: *Love must be sincere* (Romans 12:9a). The word *sincere* comes from two Latin words **sine cera** meaning 'without wax'. That is, a pottery product for sale in the shop is genuinely in good condition and that an inspector of some kind has confirmed that there are no cracks in the pot that have been covered up by wax with a view to hiding them from potential purchasers. In other words that 'what you see is actually what you get' and are paying a fair price for – if you purchase it. The NIV here translates a word that literally means 'without a mask'. It is taken from the world of the theatre where when actors and actresses changed speaking parts on the stage, they changed the mask in front of their face to signify they were now someone else in the play or drama. Paul uses this theatrical word to invite Christians to take off any mask they may have been wearing, or image they were presenting, that was not consistent with the real person within. Hypocrisy is the opposite of sincerity and other people rightly lose respect for someone who says one thing and consistently does the exact opposite. Therefore, Paul invites us to reflect: Am I genuine and sincere in my relationships with other people? Or would I entertain saying something to a person's face but something else very different behind their back? In the world people put on a 'mask' for all kinds of reasons. Maybe hiding their true self in case some of their friends didn't want to associate with them any more. Or maybe due to an inability to acknowledge something about themselves; We have a responsibility to be transparent as far as is possible in our motivation for the way we live our lives and relate to other people. We know that other people are not always sincere with us and many of us will have been let down at one time or another. However, Paul urges us not to allow ourselves to be imprisoned or controlled or significantly shaped by our past hurts and disappointments, rather to be open to God and other people that hopefully will result in happy and healthy relationships with them.

(b) **Discernment** *Hate what is evil; cling to what is good* (Romans 12:9b) However, this practical and generous love towards other people is not indiscriminate. There are things we must consciously hate and things we resolutely choose to favour. Our resources to enable us to *cling to what is good* come from God. John in I John 4:8b-11 declared: *God is love.*⁹ *This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.*¹⁰ *This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*¹¹ *Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.* Yet there is the opposite side of love reported in Proverbs 6:16-19: *There are six things the Lord hates, seven that are detestable to him: ¹⁷ haughty eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ a heart that devises wicked schemes, feet that are quick to rush into evil, ¹⁹ a false witness who pours out lies and a person who stirs up conflict in the community.* Do we desire to love the things God loves and detest the things He hates? It is the other side of love. The parent whose adult child has been brainwashed into planning to head off to join Islamic State in Syria or in the process of preparing to commit a significant crime would be loving them by reporting what they knew to the police, in order that they and other people might not be harmed by the possible consequences of their offspring's bad choices. In Hebrews 12:4-13 the author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 to indicate that one aspect of parental love towards a child is to set boundaries for their behaviour that if transgressed results in discipline. *My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when He rebukes you, ⁶ because the Lord disciplines the one He loves, and He punishes everyone He accepts as His son* (Hebrews 12:5b-6). Our attitudes and conduct must be sincere and genuine before God and other people, but it must also be marked by discernment as to what must be distinguished as 'good' and that which is 'evil'. Paul's words here emphasise actual conscious choices by each one of us and not going with the flow about what others think about a situation.

2. **Love in action** (Romans 12:10-13)

(a) **Devotion** *Be devoted to one another in love* (Romans 12:10a) As is commonly known there are four Greek words for 'love'. The first of these is 'eros'. It covers sexual love in its feelings and physical expression. This term for love is not found in the New Testament. However, the other three words are found here in Romans 12:9-10. 'Storge' and 'philadelphia' are found in Romans 12:10 in combination words translated as *devoted* and *in brotherly love*. In simple terms 'storge' relates to the love between members of a particular family. There is something special about belonging to a loving family. We suffer acute grief when a close family member dies because of the relationship with that person. We did not consciously chose it but were happy to embrace it over however many years we were blessed to share our lives with that person. The second term conveys the idea of friendship. We do not choose our relatives, but we do have that option with respect to people we designate our friends. Whether in our physical family or our church family we haven't chosen the members in its ranks, but may we reach out in genuine Christian love to be as supportive and caring as we can. There will be a much smaller number of people we designate our friends for whom we give thanks to God. Value the people God has placed around you –don't take them for granted. Is there someone you need to express your appreciation for today?

(b) **Honour** *Honour one another above yourselves* (Romans 12:10b) The words Paul uses here are conveying a sense of action. We live in a world where it is standard for people to expect to be praised and recognised for what they have done, especially those in high places who routinely populate official honours lists. The apostle here asks us to turn such thinking on its head and to go out of our way to recognise and confer honour in whatever way we can upon other people. Let them know we noticed and appreciated their dedication to duty.

Acknowledge the good things they have done, especially where praise and acknowledgement was unsought. Churches will primarily be populated by ordinary people –but we remember that the vast majority of good things that take place in our land are the result of the actions of ordinary citizens like us. I don't believe Paul was thinking of awards ceremonies or medals or certificates being presented, as this was not part of his culture. However, he has in mind a culturally appropriate means of recognising good work and how we apply that in the classroom or the office or even in the golf club will vary from place to place and time to time. Why is this helpful advice? It may reduce our disappointments when we think we have been overlooked for recognition but also increase our delight when someone else has taken the trouble to note something we have done for other people. Is there someone you want to honour this coming week? Let them know you appreciate their efforts!

(c) **Enthusiasm** *Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord* (Romans 12:11). Paul raises this issue a few times in his letters. In Galatians 6:9 he wrote: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* What does this cover? It covers each area of life. Whether at home or another place of work; engaged in church business or some other activity we need to be industrious making good use of our time and not being lazy. It is fine to schedule a day off or some hours off on a particular day as the Lord never intended us to work twenty-four hours a day. He gave us a weekly pattern of work and rest and worship to structure our week for our good and His glory. In Colossians 3:23-24 Paul wrote: *Whatever you do, work at it **with all your heart, as working for the Lord**, not for human masters,²⁴ since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. **It is the Lord Christ you are serving.*** Idleness when we could be using our time and talents for good purposes is something Paul sought to discourage at every opportunity. He also modelled a life full of purpose and meaningful activity. In II Thessalonians 3: 7-10, Paul wrote: *For you yourselves know how you ought to follow our example. We were not idle when we were with you,⁸ nor did we eat anyone's food without paying for it. On the contrary, we worked night and day, labouring and toiling so that we would not be a burden to any of you.⁹ We did this, not because we do not have the right to such help, but in order to offer ourselves as a model for you to imitate.¹⁰ For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: 'The one who is **unwilling to work shall not eat.**'* Notice carefully that Paul is describing a person who has health and opportunity to take work but declines it. It may be voluntary work or paid employment. He is not distinguishing the two here. His point is that if we have the ability and the opportunity, especially here with reference to using our talents in God's work then we ought to do what we can. However, let us also pray for and be sensitive and caring towards the people that are doing their very best to get paid employment in our community but who are kept waiting sometimes quite a long time before they can find something appropriate to do. Most of all to do our work cheerfully not with a 'long' face! In God's service there is no place for unemployment. Even when we are physically unable to do tasks we once carried out we can give a greater focus on prayer ministry. Our calling will inevitably change over the years with age and circumstances but may our enthusiasm and availability to the Lord and His people never change!

(d) **Endurance** *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer* (Romans 12:12) Here are three qualities that ought to flavour our perception of reality as we go through life year by year. **Be joyful in hope**... Paul has already mentioned this word *hope*. Romans 5:2: *And we boast [or rejoice] in the hope of the glory of God;* and Romans 8:24-25: *For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.* This is a reminder of the bigger picture or perspective of our lives. The outcome of history is certain. Jesus is coming back to reign as King of Kings and God's plans for His creation will in their fullness come to pass. Don't allow yourself to be discouraged by momentary setbacks but keep in mind what God has

guaranteed will take place in the future. *patient in affliction*...The words Paul has chosen here are not a reference to passive resignation in the face of these trials; rather it is an active steadfast endurance. It is an indication that the person in question knows exactly what lies before them but with confidence in God who grants us the strength we need is willing to trust Him for the future. The song we sing in church sometimes CMP1036 'Blessed be Your name' by Matt and Beth Redman captures so well what Paul is expressing here. *faithful in prayer*... Paul speaks much about prayer in his letter exhorting his hearers and readers to commit themselves to this work, together with his modelling of a passion for prayer in his daily life. To grasp Paul's point here includes sensing the energy he invests into it. It is not the mere performance of a duty rather it is the determination to invest the necessary time to this work so that it may gain the blessing of God for its future success by God-ordained means. One verse that captures so well what Paul is I Corinthians 15:58: *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.*

(e) **Generosity** *Share with the Lord's people who are in need* (Romans 12:13a) The idea here is our oneness with brothers and sisters in Christ who are without essential things they need to live. For Paul it was usually impoverished Jews in the Holy Land whom more prosperous Gentiles in other countries were encouraged to support. The principle here is given in Matthew 25: 34-40: *'Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. ³⁵For I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave Me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited Me in, ³⁶I needed clothes and you clothed Me, I was ill and you looked after Me, I was in prison and you came to visit Me."* ³⁷ *'Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You something to drink? ³⁸When did we see You a stranger and invite You in, or needing clothes and clothe You? ³⁹When did we see You ill or in prison and go to visit You?"* ⁴⁰ *'The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of Mine, you did for Me."* We will, as far as we can assist other people in need; however, in our biological families, together with our church families we have a particular obligation to assist one another in times of great need. Thank you for the generous gifts given in this congregation when aid appeals are made at a time of international disasters.

(f) **Hospitable** *Practise hospitality* (Romans 12:13b) In Paul's day when there were very few places of accommodation for travellers, it was essential for local Christians to assist visiting colleagues with accommodation when they were in their communities. The principle, though, is important. Spending time investing in people's lives over a cup of coffee or tea or over a meal is important. It is a concern that the ministry of hospitality is significantly on the decline in our society as people retreat into their 'castles', neither wishing to give nor receive hospitality from other people. May the people of God to the best of our ability be willing to do what we can, especially for people in need and new people in our ranks; or if our homes are unsuitable then we can arrange to meet in a coffee shop in the High Street or a similar location. Some times we need to be creative, but we get the point Paul commends here.

3. **Love in action when it is tough** (Romans 12:14-16)

Notice the step up in degree of difficulty in this next section here that will culminate in dealing with people who would actually wish us harm or be willing to perpetrate it. Paul raises four approaches to this negativity or hostility to our person or our convictions.

(a) **Graciousness** *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse* (Romans 12:14) This will primarily be a reference to people who make no profession of Christian faith yet over the last two thousand years there have also been those who thought they were doing God's work

by killing Christians who had some different opinions to them. What is particularly noteworthy here is the echo of Jesus' teaching in Luke 6:27-31: *'But to you who are listening I say: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you. ²⁹ If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.* The success of the Protestant Reformation in England was humanly speaking in part due to, for example, access to the Scriptures in English and faithful preaching of the truth, but it was engrained in the hearts and minds of many more people when they witnessed the extraordinary testimony of the 350 men and women burnt at the stake during the reign of Mary Tudor. Their faithfulness unto death was incredibly powerful. May our witness always be courageous but may it never lack Christ-like graciousness. (Luke 23:34: *Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.* These were words uttered concerning the men who crucified Him.

(b) **Identification** *Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn* (Romans 12:15) There are times when we will simply sit with someone to identify with them in their pain. There are other times when we will do the same to acknowledge the success of another person. We will never impact someone's life without drawing alongside them and engaging with them. It is not an either-or situation about praying or doing for the follower of Jesus it is both –and in our quest to see other people walk with us on the journey of faith. It requires a willingness to find the time to be in that place with someone. Social media contacts can play a part but nothing substitutes for real human fellowship and interaction. Who are you engaging with?

(c) **Good Will** *Live in harmony with one another* (Romans 12:16a) Did Paul put these words in the wrong place? Surely these words that echo Philippians 2:1-5: *Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. ⁵ In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus.* His point is simple; a church where a culture of cliques, backbiting and critical comments flourish will never truly prosper. People need to see that the Gospel works in transforming our lives, our attitudes and actions before they will try it for themselves. Part of the proof of the Spirit's work in renewing our minds is the investment we are willing to make in doing everything we can to build harmony amongst God's people in the local church. Here our actions definitely speak louder than our words. Is there anyone here with whom you need to build a more harmonious relationship?

(d). **Humility** *Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited* (Romans 12:16b) Are there types of people you really don't want in this church? We need to be willing to say 'Okay Lord –help me to be humble enough to welcome all kinds of people of whatever background into our fellowship'. Be assured that God will take us up on the offer in the coming months and years! When I am willing, joyfully, to accept people into our ranks 'who are not like me' I know my growth in grace and Christ-likeness is showing signs of progress. The credibility of our profession of faith in New Testament terms, is in part demonstrated by our love for and expressions of care towards other people, especially those who are associated with us in God's family Amen.