

## Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)

### *Letter to the Romans*

Readings: *Romans 12:1-16:27*

#### ***Reflections:***

- Christian life and conduct – Call to holiness: Paul now makes a transition in his focus. Until this point he has explained the grace of God for Jews and Gentiles as well as the work of God through the Spirit to unite us with his love. Now he moves on to focus on how do we live in that grace and translate that love into an ongoing approach to life and relationships. Paul returns to familiar imagery for the Jews and calls the people to now offer themselves as living sacrifices, rather than offering the sacrifices at the temple for their sins. (Note: I have heard it said that the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep climbing off the altar. ☺) Our own lives are to be offered to God as worship, all we are, have and do. This humble surrender and abandonment to God is our way of bringing him praise and honor. Yet to complete this full surrender, we must move beyond just surrendering our will. We must make an active choice to reject the pattern of this world, the dominant life-shaping, thought dictating culture that subtly and not so subtly conforms us to perpetual self-centeredness and instead, partner with God to renew our minds, developing new mental habits that in turn establish new lifestyle and relational habits. This renewing of the mind is a central step in the process of being changed from the inside out. We must not only experience the love of God to cast out fear we must press on to renew our minds with the truth in love so that we develop the mind of Christ. Only then can we establish a new lifestyle and approach to loving relationships. Ultimately, only as we learn the rhythm of thinking and loving as God thinks and loves, then can we discover God's will and in discovering it actively advance it in our own spheres of influence. Now we should also note that Paul may be suggesting there are three levels of understanding related to the will of God. There is discovering the good will of God (level one) that God's will is good and will accomplish the highest good. Then there is the discovering that God's will is pleasing (level two) that God's will brings a kind of pleasure and satisfaction, both to God and to those who walk in it. And then there is discovering that God's will is perfect (level three) that in hindsight we see how all things work together for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

- Use of gifts: Paul now moves on to remind the Romans of the importance of working together in community and allowing God's Spirit to animate their common relationships through the various gifts he gives them. We see that within community as God designed it we see unity and diversity held together in shared love and purpose. Paul encourages them toward humility, having an accurate self-awareness that is void of pride or jockeying for position. He lists a number of gifts given by the Spirit but this should in no way be considered an exhaustive list but rather a general overview. The gifts mentioned here are prophesy (hearing God speak and sharing that with others), serving, teaching, encouraging, giving or contributing to the needs of others, leadership, and mercy. This quick snap shot finds interesting parallel to the leadership gifts of Ephesians 4: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. The basic functions for community include these broad categories of leadership, prophecy, teaching, helping those in need/the poor, and shepherding - serving, encouraging and showing mercy. Although Paul is not speaking to leaders, these various ways of caring for each other is vital to all communities and Christ-followers of all times. The key is for each of us to know what God is calling us to and to do that with all the grace and strength God provides.
- Show love through deeds: Now beyond the specialized gifting God gives to his people there is a general approach to relationships and serving that is for all Christ-followers. Paul describes these qualities: sincere love, hating evil, clinging to the good, devotion in true family love, honoring others, spiritual passion, joyfully expectancy, patience in pain, dedicated in constant prayer, sharing with the needy, and offering hospitality. Paul is talking about continually being energized with love, humility and the desire to worship God through serving others. If we do this, imagine the kind of community we would experience and offer the world!
- Show love in relationships: Paul now zeros in on the hard to love, particularly those who oppose us as enemies. This is one of the great enemy love passages of the New Testament. We see here that we are to seek to live in harmony with everyone, even those who are actively attacking us. We are not to get into verbal battles but rather look for ways to depressurize volatile situations with a loving and gracious approach. We are to be careful not to take revenge or pay people back but rather look for ways to bless them and in leave the whole issue of wrath and judgment in God's court. It isn't that justice won't be served but rather that we are called to ambassadors of grace and love and we can trust God the only one truly capable to bring about true judgment to decide how justice is served. Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21-22 to emphasize that our enemy love has the power to bring about conviction in their lives ("burning coals on their heads") that may help them come to their senses and see us for who we are, not as their enemies. The overarching strategy for all Christ-followers is this: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:21). This is the key mindset we are to take into every difficult situation. Christ in us has the power to overcome evil as we lay our lives down in sacrificial love, just as Christ laid his life down in sacrificial love and overcame all of the power of sin and the enemy.

- **Duty toward civil authority:** Paul moves from loving your enemies on to the next logical issue, how do you respond to an evil oppressive government that treats you as its enemy? The Roman Empire was notorious for oppressing whoever it wanted and in Rome, both Christians and Jews had been persecuted. Nero was one of the worst for this, particularly against Christians. Paul's words are completely counter-intuitive. Paul calls for submission and the need to honor even the most oppressive authorities. That doesn't mean you do everything they say blindly for we must ultimately submit to God's kingship and rule. Yet, we must see that authority itself is a God-created concept and he established parents as authorities of the home as well as rulers as the authorities of states. They will be judged by God in terms of how they rule but we are still to honor them in every way we can in good conscience before God. God at times throughout the Old Testament and even here mentioned in the new, will use pagan governments as extensions of his judgment. Clearly against Israel God would use pagan nations to judge Israel. Therefore Paul points out that the states military force (the sword) can be an instrument of God and therefore we must trust that God is in control. We are to pay our taxes and show honor as an outflow of our desire to honor God. We must remember that we are foreigners in our own country. We are "alien" residents who must still pay taxes and honor the rulers and laws of the land even though we are citizens of another country and ultimately serve another king. In this way we can be supportive of the country where we live but we should never be confused where our loyalty and identity lies. We are citizens of the kingdom of Christ and he is our king.
- **Love is key to obligations:** Paul now returns to the love ethic of Jesus and reinforces again that love is the fulfillment of law. This is true of national law (for the most part) and particularly for Torah. Paul restates Jesus' own teaching and affirms again a righteousness that flows from love, not from law. Love makes the law obsolete because it more than fulfills the requirements of the laws we create.
- **Hope is the key to motivation:** Paul inserts here an encouragement to be well aware of the present situation and to not be lulled to sleep by the apparent slowness of Christ's return. "The day is almost here" most likely refers to this but it may also refer to God bringing about relief from the persecution and suffering they were enduring. Paul challenges them to live a life devoted to God and to not slip back into the pattern of Rome and a lifestyle that centers on orgies, going to temple prostitutes, and constant battling in relationships. It is hard to imagine how this could be the norm but it was. Paul's challenges themselves to be clothed with the Lord Jesus Christ (another image for being completely consumed with the Spirit and the life Jesus wants to live through them) and to place their mental focus on serving Jesus, not serving their own self-centeredness (the sinful nature or the flesh). If we don't actively pursue what Christ has for us we will slowly drift back into unhealthy ways of living and thinking.
- **Regarding mutual responsibility – not to judge conscience:** Paul's overall encouragement here is to remember that God is the final judge. This releases us from

having to make judgments on the righteousness of another Christ-followers' approach to questionable issues. We should note that for all "weak faith" means that you are more religiously legalistic and "strong faith" means you can live a more free life from the Law. Now this position can be taken to the extreme but in many matters we get it confused. We think that the more conservative or religious a person is, the more spiritual they are. In fact it is the opposite. The more a person is free from the Law but just guided by deep love for God and others, the more they are truly walking by faith and simple trust in God. As Bruxy Cavey says, "You don't get bonus points for being more conservative than God." ☺

- Matters of conscience: Paul zeros in on the two key issues, eating meat that was sacrificed to idols versus just eating vegetables (Christian vegetarians ☺) and whether to make Saturday (Sabbath) or Sunday (the day Jesus was raised) the weekly time of gathering to worship (there may have been a battle as to which day of the week they should be meeting in their home churches). The dividing lines were obviously between the Jewish Christ-followers and the Gentile Christ-followers. Paul basically says that you should not worry about what others think and only care about what Jesus thinks and leave the other Christ-followers alone if they make a different decision from you. Yet, Paul inserts the balancing principle of serving your brother or sister and not intentionally causing them to stumble. Our focus is on Christ but our love for our sister or brother also means we won't intentionally try to make life hard for them by the choices we make. Paul's concluding statements to this paragraph is to remind his readers that Jesus died and rose again so that he would be Lord of everyone and everything. He has it all covered and so we can trust him in everything and with everyone.
- Each must answer: Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23 to remind people that everyone must answer to God and God alone. You can't get away with things. God will be the final judge in righteousness and truth.
- Causing brother (or sister) to stumble: Once we are focused on Jesus and know that we are not controlled by a legal code of righteousness then it is the love that Jesus pours through us that gives us a servant's heart to do what is best for those around us. We are not motivated by a list of right and wrong that makes us religiously proud because we are better than others but rather we are motivated by love to serve others. Our mindset is not to put stumbling blocks in other people's way and yet we must always keep Jesus as our top priority. If he wants us to do something then we should do it regardless of what others think. If it is a simple preference, then we should lay that down to serve those around us. As we read this section we have to remember that for Paul our faith is what makes something acceptable. If we truly believe God is with us and blesses something then that faith is what makes it righteous in God's eyes because it is grounded in a heart of trust and obedience. Righteousness in that way becomes defined entirely by relational terms. If it is based on complete trust in God and true love for God

and others, then God will view it as righteous. Two key principles to hold in balance. “Do not allow what you consider to be good to be spoken of as evil.” In other words, if you have the faith to do something, don’t flaunt it in someone’s face so that others who are not as comfortable are provoked by your insensitivity. Then what is truly good will be viewed as evil when in fact it is good. The second principle is this: “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of (fill in the blank) but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit because anyone who serves Christ in this way is pleasing to God and approved by others.” We must always remember the kingdom is not about the externals but about the internals. When our internal world is right then the external world falls in line. Once we realize this then we are free to focus completely on serving Christ and those around us with the goal of living lives of peace and investing into others (mutual edification). God’s work is to build loving relationships and so when we pick some secondary issue and make it the reason for division and hurt feelings, we destroy God’s work for the sake of what? Food, the color of carpet in a building, the kind of music we sing? We must protect our relationships as we seek to serve God.

- Base actions upon conviction: So on questionable matters, keep your convictions to yourself and God. Don’t make it a big deal. We are blessed when we don’t go around trying to be the approval person who has to decide what is allowable and what is not allowable. We may approve something that in the end shows us to be a hypocrite. So we should just relax on that front and leave the approval/disapprove business to God. Now here we see Paul state it clearly: “Everything that does not come from faith is sin.” If we are not acting out of a trust relationship with God then we are sinning. So our strict adherence to a religious standard or guarding our religious sensibilities can be just as much sin to God as going out and getting drunk. We are not trusting God or following the leadership of his Spirit. We are taking our own lives into our own hands and in this way we sin by subtly or not so subtly rejecting the Lordship of Christ.
- Example of forbearance: Paul concludes with stating again that those who are strong (have experienced freedom in Christ from the Law) need to humbly serve those who are weak (still feel emotionally attached to the Law). We are not to judge others but remember how Jesus laid his life down for us and suffered so we could experience life and freedom. Paul quotes Psalm 69:9 to remind his readers of the selflessness of Jesus. Paul inserts here a quick prayer that asks God to truly unify this community: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement (both are needed in community) give you a spirit (or the Spirit) of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Our unity is for a reason. We have a message to get out and more importantly, we have a father who loves it when his kids get along!
- Call for mutual acceptance: Paul wraps up the entire letter with a wonderful summary. “Accept one another, then just as Christ accepted you in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth to

confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.” This is one of those brief meta-narrative summaries from Paul that focuses not so much on the inside out transformation but simply the overall mission of God to see all people restored to true relationship with him. Paul now quotes a number of Old Testament passages that confirm this: Samuel 22:50; Psalm 18:49; Deuteronomy 32:43; Psalm 117:1; Isaiah 11:10. Paul makes it clear that this was God’s intention from the beginning. Paul again prays a beautiful prayer and models how a spiritual parent prays over those they are investing into: “May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace as you trust in him so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

- Closing remarks – reason for writing: Paul affirms the spiritual maturity of the community: 1) full of goodness – truly integrated love into their lives, 2) complete in knowledge – fully integrated truth into their minds, and 3) competent to teach others – ready to be spiritual parent figures to others. Paul has been bold but he reminds them about his calling to the Gentiles and his goal to see them become an “offering acceptable to God, sanctified (changed from the inside out) by the Holy Spirit.” Paul uses Jewish imagery so that the Jewish Christians may grasp his calling before God.
- Pride in Gentile ministry: Paul articulates here his personal calling and mission. He knows his message. He knows who he owns. He is clear on his source – the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit’s power for signs and miracles. He knows how he fits into the wider mission of the church. Every leader needs to wrestle this through. Every leader needs to know who God is and how God works through him or her, who God is calling him or her to own, and how he or she fits in the larger mission and community of God. Without this clarity, we will remain fearful or detached or confused. This is what brings confidence, clarity and focus to our leadership or service to God.
- Future travel plans: As we read this passage we must remember how hard it was to travel in that time period. Paul was willing to sacrifice a lot of life’s comforts to fulfill his calling. Paul talks about his desire to visit with them as well as the priority he is placing on raising funds for the crisis in Jerusalem. Paul is not shy about making it clear that the Gentile churches should give generously to the Jerusalem church in their crisis because of the spiritual investment the Jerusalem church made into them. Mutual investment doesn’t mean you invest the same things in one another. One may give spiritual insights and encouragement and the other may invest back practical help and support. Mutuality is defined by the desire to truly meet the other person’s need. For Jerusalem, financial support was that they needed in light of the famine and all the poor that they were serving. Paul anticipates being able to come to bring them a full spiritual blessing in Christ as a gift from God in response to their generosity. Paul is reminding them of the basic spiritual principle of sowing generously with the hope of reaping generously.
- Request for prayers: As Paul often does, he encourages those he invests into to pray for him. Spiritual parenting always ends by encouraging those who receive investment to reinvest in others and even into the one who has poured into them. This isn’t being

selfish but rather demonstrating practically the importance of mutual support and investment. Paul is moved by Jesus and the Spirit to encourage them to pray to God for him. Paul is worried about the persecution he may encounter when he takes the financial support to Jerusalem. Interesting how religious leaders will attack even those who are trying to help those in need around them. Paul's hope for life is always joy in service and encouraging peace in relationship. Paul closes the letter with a final Amen and prayer for peace.

- Commendation for Phoebe: Here we see a female leader being affirmed by Paul. She was obviously a key worker and leader in the movement.
- Special greetings: Priscilla is listed before Aquilla most likely because she was more the stronger leader of the two. Of the seven passages in the New Testament that mention this couple, five list Priscilla's name first. This couple is never mentioned apart from each other most likely because Priscilla is such a strong leader. Peter's wife is virtually never mentioned and yet this couple is always mentioned by name together. Some married couples are both fully leaders and recognized as such while others will only see one of the two recognized as a leader. We also see clearly their churches met in homes in this list. Another married couple, Andronicus and Junias are mentioned as relatives of Paul and recognized as apostles. Here we see a woman mentioned as an apostle. There were more apostles than just the twelve and Paul. Barnabas was also called an apostle or "sent one" as well as this couple here. An apostle was sent by Christ to help establish the church and was the overarching key leadership role within the church. Paul's long list here affirms how well he knows this community and how deeply he loves and owns these people. Paul notes those whom he has had a special relationship with as well as those who have consistently served with passion and hard work.
- Warning about troublemakers: After affirming all those who are serving Christ well Paul warns against those in community who are divisive. Paul recognizes that he is writing this letter because some are really working to stir up division and dissent in the community. Paul points out that this approach to relationship goes against everything Jesus teaches. Paul encourages them to simply pull back and not hang out with them. This is Paul's basic approach to encourage those who are not acting in line with love and truth to help them come to their senses and ask for forgiveness for being self-centered, angry and divisive. What are we called to do? Be wise (or excellent) at what is good and innocent of what is evil, trusting that God will soon crush Satan (our true spiritual enemy) under our feet (complete triumph). This final reference to Satan may be pointing to the return of Christ or it may just be an affirmation that as they relentlessly pursue humility, unity and love, Satan gets steamrolled.
- Greetings from other brethren: Paul now lists everyone he is hanging out with at the time he wrote this letter. Timothy his right hand man is with him as well as three others who are apparently all relatives of Paul (most like distant relatives). Tertius who is acting as Paul's secretary for this letter breaks into the text and says hi himself. Paul often used

a secretary which accounts for the various writing styles of his letters. Some speculate that Paul did this because of poor eyesight. Paul also mentions his host where he staying, Gaius as well as a key city leader, Eratus, who oversees the city public works. God uses people of influence to help communicate his message to a city. The testimony of the poor being cared for is a powerful witness to the truth of Jesus' message. The testimony of influential people is also a credible witness to the truth of Jesus' message. We shouldn't divorce these two but rather see them as two ways God affirms to larger community the validity of the message of Jesus.

- Praise to God: Paul finally concludes this book (hard to call it a letter) with a final prayer. Let's check it out: "Now to him who is able to establish you by the gospel (royal message) and the proclamation of Jesus Christ (or announcement that Jesus is the Messiah/King), according to the revelation of the mystery (secret) hidden for long ages past (back into the story of Israel), but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of God (What are these prophetic writings? The prophets of Israel pointing to Christ? Or is Paul alluding to his own letters and other writings of the apostles that explain the Gospel of Jesus, in other words the New Testament writings?) so that all nations might believe and obey him (this would suggest that these are Christian writings Paul is talking about) – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen." Paul ends with a bang as he summarized God's vision to see all people welcomed into an inclusive, loving global family.