

Beyond Personal Salvation



An Exposition of Romans 9-16

by John Edmiston

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Introduction

Beyond Personal Salvation is a compilation of a series of 42 daily bible studies from Eternity Daily Bible Study and is an exposition of the second half of the book of Romans (Romans 9-16). It follows on from *The Righteousness Which Is By Faith* which was an exposition of Romans 1-8.

The first half of Romans focuses on our personal, individual salvation and standing in Christ. The second half of Romans goes beyond this and looks at our concern for and relationship with other people in the mainly Gentile congregations that Paul ministered to.

Romans 9-16 takes us into the realm of practical Christianity that agonizes over the lost and which seeks to help and not hinder one's brother in the faith. It spends a lot of time dealing with issues that "stretch" people to go beyond their cultural comfort zones and includes issues about the salvation of Israel, relationships of Gentiles with Torah-observant Christian Jews (what we would call Messianic Jews today), handling governments and ruling authorities, and dealing with values conflicts.

Paul also covers some of the basic lifestyle teachings of Christianity, personal sanctification and holiness, love, spiritual gifts, and an explanation of the rationale behind his apostolic ministry to the Gentiles. Many of the issues covered in Romans chapters 9-16 are still controversial. Paul's teaching here is as relevant today as it was then and forms a concise explanation of what the well-lived Christian life looks like.

This 85 page book is suitable for use as a textbook in an undergraduate or diploma level bible course. It may also be used in churches, home groups and campus bible studies. Theologically the studies stick very close to the text and are from a mainstream charismatic renewal / Pentecostal perspective - though I think the majority of evangelicals should be quite comfortable with the theology. It is intended for intermediate level Christian discipleship and complex theological jargon is generally avoided.

If this is being used as a textbook the suggested assessment would be a 2000 word assignment or term paper around the topic: *"How does Romans chapters 9-16 equip Paul's co-workers and disciples, in the network of Gentile churches, to deal with the urgent theological and practical issues of the day?"*

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Blessings,



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11th March 2007



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Romans 9:1-5 MKJV *I tell the truth in Christ, I do not lie, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, (2) that I have great heaviness and continual pain in my heart. (3) For I myself was wishing to be accursed from Christ for my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh, (4) who are Israelites; to whom belong the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the Law, and the service of God, and the promises; (5) whose are the fathers, and of whom is the Christ according to flesh, He being God over all, blessed forever. Amen.*

Paul is deeply pained by the Jews rejection of God. Now we must understand precisely what the Jews had rejected. The Jews had not rejected the idea of God, or the Scriptures. Nor had they abandoned morality and become wild and dissolute. Their culture was full of God-statements and religion and Torah and morals. What they had rejected was God Himself, the very person of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Jews had a wonderful, deep and lasting spiritual heritage: *to whom belong the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the Law, and the service of God, and the promises; (5) whose are the fathers, and of whom is the Christ according to flesh*

However they had taken this heritage and turned it into a system based on human pride and spiritual achievement. They set up their own standards of righteousness, based on rule-keeping and respectability – and they failed to accept the grace and faith based righteousness that was offered by Jesus Christ.

Romans 10:1-4 MKJV *Brothers, truly my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is for it to be saved. (2) For I bear record to them that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. (3) For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God. (4) For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes.*

Despite their zeal for God, Israel still needed salvation. Earnestness was not enough. Good intentions and sincerity was not enough. And fastidious law-keeping was not enough. The Jews needed – and still need the salvation that is found only in Christ Jesus.

This has bearing on inter-faith dialogue today for if the Jews are not saved, then neither will the Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sufis, Sikhs, Jainists, or Zoroastrians be saved! In fact no one can be saved apart from faith in Christ Jesus! The following verses back this up:

Acts 4:12 MKJV *And there is salvation in no other One; for there is no other name under Heaven given among men by which we must be saved.*

1 John 5:11-12 MKJV *And this is the record, that God has given to us everlasting life, and this life is in His Son. (12) He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

1 Timothy 2:3-6 MKJV *For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, (4) who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. (5) For God is one, and there is one Mediator of God and of men, the Man Christ Jesus, (6) who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.*

Out of the kindness of their hearts most Christians would like the Jews and the sincere Muslims and the nice peaceful Buddhists to be saved. It seems unfair that they are not saved. Indeed the lack of salvation of the Jews caused Paul deep pain, and unceasing agony in his heart! And who is kinder than God who desires that all people be saved and come to a knowledge of the Truth! So, if God is so kind why are not the good, respectable, nice, clean-living Jews saved?

Firstly salvation is not so much about getting into Heaven as it is about getting to know God and becoming like Him. And so if we refuse relationship with God, then we can go no further, no matter how nice we are. In fact our niceness can even get in the way of our salvation. It may lead us to become smug and proud and to lack repentance and faith and thus ultimately to rely on our own good works instead of relying on what Christ has done for us.

Paul was so desperate for the salvation of the Jews that he would have foregone his own salvation if that sacrifice would have brought the Jews to faith in Jesus Christ. But it could not and would not. The Jews would have to make their own decision for or against Jesus.

We are to be intercessors for the unreached, unceasingly crying out to God that they may be saved: *Brothers, truly my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is for it to be saved.* We can put Muslims, Buddhists, Taoists or the people group that the Lord has placed in our heart into that verse e.g *Brothers, truly my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Kazakhs is for them to be saved.*

Intercession and salvation are closely linked in Scripture, whether it be physical salvation from an approaching enemy or from a storm or the spiritual salvation from sin that is in Christ Jesus - and history tells us every great outbreak of salvation has been preceded by prevailing prayer!

We need to pray that proud hearts will be broken down and that people will put aside self-righteousness and accept the righteousness that is in Christ Jesus for self-righteousness stops salvation in its tracks:

Romans 10:3-4 (3) *For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God.* (4) *For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes.*

Galatians 5:2-6 MKJV *Behold, I, Paul, say to you that if you are circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. (3) For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do all the Law, (4) you who are justified by Law are deprived of all effect from Christ; you fell from grace. (5) For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness out of faith. (6) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any strength, but faith working through love.*

[The problem with Jewish circumcision [being that it was an attempt to gain righteousness from ceremony and tradition rather than through faith.]

This is why Islam is so resistant to Christ – for it is a system of self-righteous works without assured forgiveness or grace.

We should agonize over the lost, and not “just vaguely hope” they will be saved, but rather we should pray for them and go to them, and ensure that they hear the gospel !

Romans 10:12-15 MKJV *For there is no difference both of Jew and of Greek, for the same Lord over all*

is rich to all who call on Him. (13) For everyone, "whoever shall call on the name of the Lord will be saved." (14) How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without preaching? (15) And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things!"

Romans 9:6-8

Children of Promise

Romans 9:6-8 MKJV Not however that the Word of God has failed, for not all those of Israel are Israel; (7) nor because they are the seed of Abraham are they all children. But, "In Isaac shall your Seed be called." (8) That is, not the children of the flesh are children of God; but the children of the promise are counted for a seed. The problem for Paul was that the Jews had not believed in Jesus. Was this the same as saying that God had not saved His chosen people and that His promises through the prophets had come to nought?

The Jews interpreted the Old Testament as meaning they were automatically right with God and entitled to salvation simply through being children of Abraham. They had the patriarchs and the Law and the right religious system so they were saved, or at least first in line for salvation and if God did not save them all, then He was at fault in some way.

Paul's answer is that God does not choose by the flesh, but by the promise. That is physical descent alone does not guarantee salvation. Salvation comes from entering into God's kingdom through His precious and gracious promises received by faith. To illustrate this Paul looks at the children of Abraham.

Now Abraham had eight sons, Isaac through his wife Sarah, Ishmael through her concubine Hagar and six through his second wife Keturah after Sarah died: "And she bore him Zimran, and Jokshan, and Medan, and Midian, and Ishbak, and Shuah" (Genesis 25:2). Only one of these was the "son of promise" through Sarah, and that was Isaac and he became of the line of Christ and received the entire inheritance.

The "seed" was Isaac, the rest were simply physical children who were blessed, given gifts and sent away. In fact the other children of Abraham became enemies of Israel and opposers of the work of God. They were not of the spiritual line, they did not belong to the "red thread of redemption".

Paul then goes on to use Jacob and Esau as an example of pure election, but we will tackle that thorny topic tomorrow. Today we want to establish the fact that God's promises and God's work are God's choice and do not pass through any process of physical inheritance in an automatic fashion (though blessing can certainly flow down faithful believing families for many generations). No one can say "my father was a Christian therefore I am saved". Each person must find God for themselves, or rather be found by Him. As someone has wisely said "God has no grand-children".

Also no one can say "because I come from a family of atheists I cannot be saved". No physical family lineage stands between you and God. He can call someone out of the darkest of circumstances and has done so many, many times.

The question then remains – why could not God "make it happen"? Why was not all Israel saved? Why did He allow some to fall away from grace? If God is both all good and all powerful then surely all Israel should have been saved? Did His promises fail? It will take the whole of Romans 9-11 to answer this question fully but we will start on it tonight.

Paul's first answer is that *for not all those of Israel are Israel*; (Romans 9:6). In other words there are two Israels, a physical Israel which is "according to the flesh" and a spiritual Israel which is according to faith, according to the promise and according to election.

We see the above principle working in every single church and we can just as easily say "Not all who are Baptists are Baptists" (or substitute the denomination you belong to or know of). There are those who go to church and just warm the pews and never believe and yet call themselves Baptists (or whatever) and yet who do not believe, who are not born-again, and who are not truly saved and therefore not truly Baptists in the fullest and truest sense of being a Baptist.

Now hopefully everyone getting this devotional is aware that you cannot simply be saved by belonging to a good Baptist family and going to a good Baptist church. You actually have to make a personal decision to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior, then you are saved, then you are truly and really a Baptist (or whatever your chosen denomination is).

Even if you have a thousand degrees in theology unless you believe the promises of God in Christ are true for you personally, then you are outside the Kingdom, no matter how far "in" or "up" you may be in an official ecclesiastical structure. We are never spiritually validated by the flesh, by descent, by degrees, or by the mere approval of men. Our entire spiritual validity comes from being born-again and entering the Kingdom of God.

Nicodemus was at the top of the Jewish theological, social and ecclesiastical tree but he had to be born-again in order to enter the Kingdom of God (John 3:1-12) and in the very next chapter of John's gospel we find someone who was as far in the other direction as possible, a Samaritan woman who had five marriages and now living in sin, also entering the Kingdom of God. The side by side comparison of Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman is a deliberate teaching tool by John the Apostle and shows us that social position, up or down, male or female, educated or uneducated, Jew or Samaritan, insider or outsider, is irrelevant, even utterly irrelevant. What matters is believing in Christ Jesus and entering into the Kingdom of God!

So physical descent did not entitle the Jews to automatic salvation – they still had to believe. And having Moses and the prophets and the law and the Temple and the sacrifices did not entitle the Jews to automatic salvation – they still had to believe.

God's promises work for those who believe and they do not come about for those who refuse to believe. If Israel had all believed, then all Israel would have been saved, and indeed this will happen one day! (We will see that, and why it has been delayed as we go through Romans 9-11)

Why then does God not compel all to believe? Because belief must be related in some way to character, and especially to repentance. If even the defiant rogue was compelled to believe, and did not abandon being a defiant rogue, but increased in treachery while still believing in God, then Heaven would quickly become Hell. Giving eternal life to wicked hearts is a recipe for disaster – which is why after the Fall, Adam was banished from the Garden of Eden and the tree of life was put out of reach, guarded by a flaming cherub.

Genesis 3:22-24 MKJV *And Jehovah God said, Behold, the man has become as one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever, (23) therefore Jehovah God sent him out from the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he had been taken. (24) And He drove out the man. And He placed cherubs at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.*

And so repentance and faith must go hand in hand. The wicked must not enter the Kingdom of God, but only the truly repentant must go in, who accept the cost of becoming like Christ.

But cannot repentance be forced? Cannot change of character be compelled by the hand of God? It appears not, or surely Satan would have been forced into line long ago. Beings with free will can choose not to change. They can become hardened and stubborn, their consciences can become seared as with a hot iron and they can defy God forever.

So in any group of people, whether Israel, or the Baptists or the Methodists or the Pentecostals there will be two groups, one will be outwardly religious, in form only, and the other will be inwardly spiritual, truly believing and of faith and of the promise. And the outwardly religious will persecute the inwardly spiritual for the flesh will always persecute those who are of the Spirit.

Galatians 4:28-31 MKJV *But brothers, we, like Isaac, are children of promise. (29) But then even as he born according to flesh persecuted him born according to the Spirit, so it is also now. (30) But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave-woman and her son; for in no way shall the son of the slave-woman inherit with the son of the free woman." (31) Then, brothers, we are not children of a slave-woman, but of the free woman.*

So God's promises are for the children of promise, and not for those "born according to the flesh" - who do not inherit at all. The promises of God are for those born according to the Spirit, and who have Christ in them as their hope of glory.

Romans 2:28-29 MKJV *For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that outwardly in flesh; (29) but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart; in spirit and not in letter; whose praise is not from men, but from God.*

Not all who are of Israel are Israel. We cannot organize our way to Heaven. There must be an inward and spiritual work, we must be circumcised of heart, by the Spirit, through repentance and faith and thus receive our praise and spiritual validation from God and not from men. God's promises have not failed, they simply only work for the children of promise, and that has been God's way from all eternity. And how do we become a child of promise? By receiving Jesus as Lord and Savior!

John 1:12-13 MKJV *But as many as received Him, He gave to them authority to become the children of God, to those who believe on His name, (13) who were born, not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but were born of God.*

Romans 9:9-18

Election

Romans 9:9-18 MKJV *For this is the word of promise: "At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son." (10) And not only this, but when Rebekah also had conceived by one, by our father Isaac (11) (for the children had not yet been born, neither had done any good or evil; but that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who called,) (12) it was said to her, "The elder shall serve the younger." (13) As it is written, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." (14) What shall we say then? Is there not unrighteousness with God? Let it not be! (15) For He said to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (16) So then it is not of the one willing, nor of the one running, but of God, the One showing mercy. (17) For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "Even for this same purpose I have raised you up, that I might show My power in you, and that My name might be declared throughout all the earth." (18) Therefore He has mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will, He hardens.*

This is one of the most difficult theological passages in the Bible and has a few varying interpretations. I will give the view that I think best fits the facts, the other views can be found in a good commentary or

theological text such as the systematic theologies by Grudem or Erickson. I simply do not have the space to deal with them all.

God has the right to set the destiny of any individual, for greatness or humility, but how we react to that destiny is up to us. God said the Esau would serve Jacob “the older shall serve the younger” and that was His choice. Esau had a very physical nature full of carnal appetites and sold his inheritance for a bowl of soup when he was hungry. His nature was that of a person enslaved, so of course he ended up serving Jacob who had a higher and more spiritual nature. The fate decreed by God and the nature of the people involved were closely intertwined.

Genesis 25:29-34 MKJV *And Jacob boiled soup. And Esau came from the field, and he was faint. (30) And Esau said to Jacob, I beg you, Let me eat of the red, this red soup, for I am faint. Therefore his name was called Edom. (31) And Jacob said, Sell me your birthright today. (32) And Esau said, Behold, I am at the point of dying, and what profit shall this birthright be to me? (33) And Jacob said, Swear to me this day. And he swore to him, and he sold his birthright to Jacob. (34) Then Jacob gave Esau bread and soup of lentils. And he ate and drank, and rose up and went his way. And Esau despised his birthright.*

Similarly Pharaoh was an ego maniac, he would never truly listen or repent. Such a person when shown clear spiritual signs only hardens their heart. God knew this and put Pharaoh in a place so that through this powerful and most unreasonable man He could show His might. God's hardening of Pharaoh consisted of showing him miracles that would have made any reasonable person believe. But because of Pharaoh's inner nature, his pride, his arrogance, his need to be in control, it only hardened him!

The compassion of God consists in His allowing our conscience to function, of enabling us to see and believe the truth so that we might be saved. Some people, like Esau, are spiritual blockheads and place no value on anything except their immediate sensory needs. We never see Esau building an altar or engaging in worship. Rather he is always out hunting or eating or marrying the wrong kind of women and making all the worst moves at the wrong times. He even sells his inheritance and is cheated out of his blessing - despite the wishes of Isaac in this regard. In fact Esau later becomes a symbol of the carnal man:

Hebrews 12:14-17 MKJV *Follow peace with all, and holiness, without which no one shall see the Lord; (15) looking diligently lest any fail of the grace of God, or lest any root of bitterness springing up disturb you, and by it many are defiled, (16) (lest there be any fornicator, or profane person like Esau, who for one morsel of food sold his birthright. (17) For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected; for he did not find any place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears).*

Paul's point is that we don't make our own destiny. That is God's to apportion.

(11) (for the children had not yet been born, neither had done any good or evil; but that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of Him who called,)(16) So then it is not of the one willing, nor of the one running, but of God, the One showing mercy. .. Therefore He has mercy on whom He will have mercy, and whom He will, He hardens.

The opposite to God's mercy and election is given in active words such as 'works', 'willing', and 'running'. Human exertion cannot change divine destiny. Jacob did nothing but was made the heir. Esau worked hard, strove, clumsily tried to please his father and sought the blessing with tears - but was excluded.

Election stands in the calling and appointing of God. I cannot make God choose me by being very, very good. And I cannot make God not choose me by being very, very bad (e.g. Saul, the thief on the cross, the Samaritan woman, Mary Magdalene etc). Sometimes we can glimpse a reason for God's choosing someone, at other times it is a complete mystery.

To some extent this also applies to success in ministry. We can think "why does so and so have that big church and I only have this little church when my sermons are so much more biblical than his..." etc. It is not Billy Graham that I envy but the pastor down the road!

I believe that I was called to be a missionary from birth or even before the womb, even though I only became a Christian at age 21. Now I can see God's hand preparing me right from day one or earlier! I did not choose to be a missionary, in fact it was the furthest thing from my mind, in fact I wanted to be a scientist, but God's calling was effectual for me.

Why isn't everyone called to serve as a missionary overseas? That is God's doing, God's decision, and He has the right to order the world, just the way He wants. Where then is human freedom and dignity? In how we respond to our calling. I can be a good missionary or a bad missionary, a faithful servant, or a lazy and wicked servant, that is my choice to make and if I am faithful I will be rewarded for making the right choices on those issues.

A certain portion of our life is pre-set and determined, the rest is ours to choose. God has saved us by grace, through His calling and election, and given us good works to do, but how we do them is up to us:

Ephesians 2:8-10 MKJV *For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them.*

We cannot ever get a handle on God so that we can manipulate Him so that He is good to us and always gives us what we want. If we could, then God would be our servant, and we would effectively be god. And that is simply not going to happen! That is why God says to Moses: *"I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion."*

By way of analogy, if you go to the animal shelter to adopt a pet you can have mercy on only one or two animals out of hundreds. You "elect" one to live in your home and that is your choice and no matter how cute the other dogs or cats are, they are not chosen. You have mercy and compassion only on the one you have chosen. And no one can argue with your choice!

God looks down from heaven on broken mankind and chooses some to be redeemed and to live in Heaven with Him. Now He wants all to hear the gospel, but He knows that only a fraction will respond to the gospel. Those that choose to believe are the ones He chooses to take into His heavenly home.

Here the theological schools of thought differ widely. Some say that God even appoints who will believe and who will not believe and that God has selected each person who will be saved before they were born, and that He has also selected those who will not be saved before they were born. Others say that God wants all to be saved and chooses on the basis of their faith response. And there are in-between views as well.

For me it is as if there were two trains, a gospel train with its destination pre-set to heaven and a worldly train with its destination pre-set to Hell. If we get on the gospel train, if we are in Christ, then we are pre-destined to go where the destination of the train is, that is to Heaven. And if we choose to stay on the

world's train then we are pre-destined to go to its terrible destination as well. Some people seem born on one train or the other (John the Baptist was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and Judas was the "son of perdition") but that does not preclude them being able to switch trains at some point. God send us missionaries into the world to persuade people to switch trains and to be saved. My view is that while some people are like John the Baptist or Judas and have iron-clad destinies most of us have a real choice, we are in the middle of the bell curve so to speak, not at the extremes. For us our spiritual destiny is not so firmly set and there is a need for someone to come with the gospel and to offer us the means of salvation.

The Jews thought they had a hammer-lock on God, that He would have to save them, all of them, and that their sufferings, or their obedience of the Law, or their determination and effort would ensure this. But God replies – it is not the amount you have suffered, or your good works, or your strong will or your athletic ("running") exertion that matters. You have no hammer-lock on Me. I am God and I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and compassion on whom I will have compassion – and yes even upon the Gentiles who have not sought My salvation!

Romans 9:19-26

The Potter's Hand

Romans 9:19-26 MKJV *You will then say to me, Why does He yet find fault? For who has resisted His will? (20) No, but, O man, who are you who replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him who formed it, Why have you made me this way? (21) Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel to honor and another to dishonor? (22) What if God, willing to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction; (23) and that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy which He had before prepared to glory; (24) whom He also called, not only us, of Jews, but also of the nations? (25) As He also says in Hosea, "I will call those not My people, My people; and those not beloved, Beloved." (26) And it shall be, in the place where it was said to them. "You are not My people; there they shall be called sons of the living God."*

This is a very controversial passage. Again I will give my understanding of it, aware that some may yet disagree (hopefully in love)! The basics are:

1. God is depicted as a Potter fashioning vessels.
2. They are fashioned "out of the same lump of clay".
3. Some become vessels of honor
4. Others become vessels of dishonor
5. Some are "fitted to destruction"
6. Others are "vessels of mercy.... before prepared for glory"
7. This will result in both Jews and Gentiles being saved

The depiction of God as a Potter depicts Him as Creator and as Creator having an irresistible right to make us any way that He wants. Who we "turn out to be" is God's decision! It is the same clay in both cases. The same human nature, the same "stuff". Scripture constantly asserts that God can do anything with anyone, and even takes small insignificant people and uses them to overthrow the mighty and the powerful.

God's absolute sovereignty as Creator means that we are never "self-made men" nor are we "made by the system" and we certainly are not determined by our economic class, educational level or cultural attainments. God can choose someone out of a world gone insane (like Noah) or a city filled with idols (like Abraham) or even the most stubborn, narrow-minded, hateful and angry zealot (like Paul) and make a great man or woman of God out of them!

Because God decided how people turn out we can never look at a person and say “they will never amount to anything!”. For that is reckoning without God! Now this is precisely what the Jews had thought about the Gentiles. They saw themselves as God's friends, and God's chosen ones and the recipients of His revelation and intervention. The Gentiles were viewed as immoral, unenlightened demon-worshipping pagans who had no hope and no promise.

Paul then upsets the apple-cart by asserting that:

1. Jews and Gentiles were made from the same lump of clay (the clay that Adam was formed from).
2. That God has a perfect right to have mercy on the Gentiles if He wanted to make them into vessels of honor. God can make even the Gentiles turn out OK.
3. That God was not obligated to save anyone, no matter how much the Jews thought of themselves, and could make them into vessels of dishonor if he so chose to. No one is so good that they have a hammer lock on salvation.
4. We have no right to protest against what God does because He is the Creator and we are just His creation.

What this does is to snap any connection between our works and our salvation. Paul says “No one is so bad that God cannot save them, nor is anyone so naturally virtuous that they have a “right to salvation” and so cannot end up in Hell.” The gangster can end up going to Heaven and the choir-boy can end up going to Hell. When God decides to have mercy on someone and to prepare them for glory (even if they are far from the Lord at the moment) – then they will turn out OK. People who are not God's people, can become God's people! (verses 24-26 above).

This leads naturally to the question. If our salvation has nothing to do with us, and everything to do with God, then how can God blame anyone for not being saved? *You will then say to me, Why does He yet find fault? For who has resisted His will? (20) No, but, O man, who are you who replies against God? Shall the thing formed say to Him who formed it, Why have you made me this way?*

We cannot “reply against God” and complain about the way we are made. It may not seem fair, but God has a perfect right to make any person any way that He so desires. This is very hard for us to take. I am very glad that God chose me to be a “vessel of mercy” and that His loving purposes have surrounded my life. Others, like Judas Iscariot, were not so fortunate.

Why are some vessels “fitted for destruction” , those like Judas who was a “son of perdition” and not even three years with Jesus could save his soul? This is a great mystery! God has a “remnant” of humanity that are saved – and we will learn more about this remnant as we go further into this chapter.

I believe that prayer has a lot to do with who is saved! Revivals – when many get saved and whole cities find Christ come in answer to prevailing prayer. And Paul prays for the lost (Romans 10:1), and tells Timothy to do the same (1 Timothy 2:1-6), so perhaps the issue of who gets saved is “God's business” but God's business can be influenced by prayer. I certainly believe that my own salvation was brought about by the prayers of a neighbor and of some Christian friends at university.

The question of destiny is God's business alone. Race, culture, ability and intelligence have nothing to do with it. We cannot batter our way into heaven by sheer willpower or even stay out of heaven by going wild (but that is no license to sin!). What matters is what the Potter chooses to make out of the clay. But the Potter is not some cold, distant Being, rather He is a God of love who can be appealed to by prayer. From Abraham to Jabez to Moses prevailing prayer has influenced human destiny! People that God wanted to destroy in His wrath were spared. And those born into pain (like Jabez) became mighty and strong.

The only way to change your life is by asking the Potter to make you a better person. You cannot make yourself. You cannot construct yourself. In fact you don't even know here to start!

You need to ask God for mercy! When God changes your destiny, then your work will pay off. But unless God has mercy, you will simply get nowhere. Put away your pride and ask God for grace in every area of your life!

The testimony of Scripture is that God hears every cry for mercy and that "all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). But that salvation is not their doing or deserving, rather it is from the Potter's merciful hand.

Romans 9:27-33

The Holy Remnant

Romans 9:27-33 MKJV *Isaiah also cries concerning Israel, "Though the number of the sons of Israel is as the sands of the sea, a remnant shall be saved. (28) For He is bringing the matter to an end, and cutting short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work on the earth." (29) And as Isaiah said before, "Unless the Lord of hosts had left us a seed, we would have been as Sodom, and would have been like Gomorrah." (30) What shall we say then? That the nations, who did not follow after righteousness have taken on righteousness, but a righteousness of faith. (31) But Israel, who followed after a law of righteousness did not arrive at a law of righteousness. (32) Why? Because it was not of faith, but as it were by the works of the Law. For they stumbled at that Stumbling-stone; (33) as it is written, "Behold, I lay in Zion a Stumbling-stone and a Rock-of-offense, and everyone believing on Him shall not be put to shame."*

Salvation is neither automatic or universal. The first quote from Isaiah: "Though the number of the sons of Israel is as the sands of the sea, a remnant shall be saved." indicates that salvation is not universal, in fact not even close to it. Though the number of Israelites be many millions, even as the sand of the sea (which someone has calculated to be about 10,000,000,000,000,000,000 ! or 10 to the power 22), only a remnant shall be saved.

The second quote: "Unless the Lord of hosts had left us a seed, we would have been as Sodom, and would have been like Gomorrah." indicates that unless God is merciful, no one is able to be saved. In fact if God was not merciful we would all suffer the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Doom is automatic, but salvation is only by the grace of God!

Now this mercy of God, which is God's own personal initiative, can be offered to anyone. It is not earned in any way or deserved at all, in order that grace may be fully grace, and not a wage of some kind. In fact those who least "deserved it" (the Gentiles) ended up being saved: *What shall we say then? That the nations, who did not follow after righteousness have taken on righteousness, but a righteousness of faith.*

By contrast the comparatively clean-living Jews did not find salvation. Why? Because they thought they could earn it. To try to earn salvation is tantamount to taking from the Lord the honor of deciding who is saved and who is not saved, and instead placing it within reach of one's own human ability. Salvation is always God's work, God's initiative and God's choice. No amount of human religious effort can earn God's love.

However God has appointed a way by which anyone can be saved – through faith in Christ Jesus as Lord and Savior. This is what Paul calls “a righteousness of faith”. This righteousness is internal and comes from a conscience that correctly perceives that Jesus is Lord and which then believes in and trusts this as a divine spiritual fact.

God has chosen who will be saved – those who believe in His Son, for he who has the Son, has life and he who does not have the Son, does not have life.

1 John 5:11-13 MKJV *And this is the record, that God has given to us everlasting life, and this life is in His Son. (12) He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (13) I have written these things to you who believe on the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have everlasting life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God.*

The remnant are those who do not “stumble over the stumbling stone” - which is Christ, and the cross and its impact on or human pride and our attempts at self-justification. If we try to justify ourselves then we miss out on the justification that comes from God! If we stop trying to justify ourselves and cry out in repentance and faith “God have mercy on me, a sinner” then we are saved! This is aptly illustrated in Jesus' story about the publican and the Pharisee.

Luke 18:9-14 MKJV *And He spoke this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous, and despised others: (10) Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-collector. (11) The Pharisee stood and prayed within himself in this way: God, I thank You that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector. (12) I fast twice on the Sabbath, I give tithes of all that I possess. (13) And standing afar off, the tax-collector would not even lift up his eyes to Heaven, but struck on his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner! (14) I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself shall be abased, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.*

The holy remnant = those who repent and believe. Since true repentance is rare and abiding faith is uncommon then the holy remnant, the humble faithful God-dependant saints, will tend to be a minority (the exception being during times of great revival).

Paul's third quote is: *"Behold, I lay in Zion a Stumbling-stone and a Rock-of-offense, and everyone believing on Him shall not be put to shame."* So we see that all who believe in Christ are saved. Yet all who wish to hold onto their own self-esteem, and to who seek their own self-justification, these are the ones who stumble and are lost.

Israel missed out on salvation because it wanted a salvation that could be earned by human effort through adherence to the Law. They got their spiritual “gold stars” for how well they obeyed this Law, and it formed a sort social and religious hierarchy that made them feel important. For them salvation was like climbing a ladder and they were very proud of how many rungs they had attained to.

But Jesus said that there is no such spiritual ladder of attainment. Even lepers and prostitutes and tax-gatherers and the Samaritan woman at the well got into the Kingdom before the High Priests!

The ladder has been replaced by the 'eye of the needle' a narrow portal, a narrow way, that is only found by the meek, the humble, the penitent, the seeking and by those who believe.

Many religious organizations, by their hierarchical nature, tend to give the impression of re-creating the now deposed “ladder of attainment”. This tends to kill the spiritual life within them by producing spiritual pride. It is frequently the fringe-dwellers and mavericks within them that do the most significant Christian ministry.

God's holy remnant sometimes equates to those who are on the fringes of the formal ecclesiastical system. Those who are still conscious of their sin, who are humble and meek, who are gentle and kind and gracious and who do not justify themselves or despise others.

Salvation is God's work, not man's achievement. Unless God was merciful no one would be saved. Salvation is not universal, but is for a holy remnant who believe, but all who do believe are saved.

Romans 10:1-4 **A Zeal For God Is Not Good Enough**

Romans 10:1-4 MKJV *Brothers, truly my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is for it to be saved. (2) For I bear record to them that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. (3) For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God. (4) For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes.*

The Jews are zealous for God, but nevertheless are not saved, because they are trying to “establish their own righteousness”, rather than humbly submitting to the righteousness of God.

As we saw earlier God is the one who decides salvation, and who decides who He will adopt into His family. We cannot force our entry into heaven through our own goodness, in fact we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23) and mankind has become so darkened in their mind (Ephesians 2:1-4, 4:18) that unless God is merciful we are all “shut up in unbelief” (Romans 11:32). Thus salvation is impossible through human effort, apart from the mercy of God. As someone once said “The only thing of ourselves that we bring to our salvation is our sin, of which we are forgiven.”

The religious system based on the premise that “if you are good enough you will go to Heaven” is called, by Paul, “the law of righteousness”. It says that justification, and relationship with God, is dependent on how good we are, on achieving some set level of personal righteousness in conformity to a certain set of rules given by God. Thus many Jews sought to obey the Ten Commandments plus the other 613 laws of Moses set out in the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

This law of righteousness system only brought guilt and condemnation because no one was capable of living up to it, except Jesus, who eventually fulfilled it and brought it to an end on the Cross.

Romans 10:4 *For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes.*

The entire Jewish legal system based on the rules set down by Moses was demolished by the death of Christ, not just the sacrificial system or cultural rules, the whole thing, the whole system of earning salvation through personal merit which no one could achieve:

Romans 7:4-6 MKJV *So, my brothers, you also have become dead to the law by the body of Christ so that you should be married to Another, even to Him raised from the dead, that we should bring forth fruit to God. (5) For when we were in the flesh, the passions of sin worked in our members through the law to bring forth fruit*

to death. (6) *But now we having been set free from the Law, having died to that in which we were held, so that we serve in newness of spirit and not in oldness of the letter.*

We are now given our salvation as a free gift and do not have to earn it in any way, through obedience to any set of rules. The “oldness of the letter” - the old system of living by a book of rules, is over and has replaced by “the newness of the Spirit” living by the righteousness of faith, by the work of the Holy Spirit in the inner man.

Romans 6:22-23 MKJV *But now, being made free from sin, and having become slaves to God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end everlasting life. (23) For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The fact that we no longer have to live by a legal code, does not mean that we can sin freely. The whole purpose of the Holy Spirit's work in the inner man is to make us holy, grace is given not so we can have a free pass to sin more and more, but so we might be strengthened in our inner self so that we might become like Jesus Christ. We are freed from sin so that we might bear fruit to holiness (Romans 6:22 above).

Zeal for religion does not equate to salvation unless you truly accept god's way of righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Making up rules that will justify you before God and prove that you are good does not help your case at all - in fact such rules cut you off from grace! Some early Christians in Galatia thought that adding the Jewish ritual of circumcision would make them more like Abraham and more “Jewish” and thus closer to God and to salvation. Sadly it had precisely the opposite effect:

Galatians 5:1-6 MKJV *Stand fast therefore in the liberty with which Christ has made us free, and do not again be held with the yoke of bondage. (2) Behold, I, Paul, say to you that if you are circumcised, Christ shall profit you nothing. (3) For I testify again to every man that is circumcised, that he is a debtor to do all the Law, (4) **you who are justified by Law are deprived of all effect from Christ; you fell from grace.** (5) For we through the Spirit wait for the hope of righteousness out of faith. (6) For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any strength, but faith working through love.*

So we see that “rule-keeping religion” is a serious sin against God! The attempt to justify ourselves before God on the basis of our own good works and meritorious lifestyle is one way of saying “I don't need help, don't need grace, I will do it myself, I will set aside the grace of God” and thus is a repudiation of Christ's sacrifice on the cross:

Galatians 2:21 MKJV *I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness is through law, then Christ died without cause.*

The “law of righteousness”, the system that zealous, sincere good works would win us God's favor and entrance to heaven has been utterly demolished by Christ's work on the cross. Now salvation is a free gift, that is accepted by faith and given by a gracious God.

Ephesians 2:8-9 MKJV *For by grace you are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, (9) not of works, lest anyone should boast.*

The Jews thought they could boast before God, they had the law, the prophets, and the Temple, they lived good clean-living lives, and they were keen and zealous keepers of the rules. But this was precisely the wrong approach! God does not want heaven filled with boastful, strong-willed religious fanatics! He wants Heaven filled with people who are humble, penitent, broken, kind and loving and who receive His free gifts with gratitude and faith!

The problem with rule-keeping is that it puts the self at the center of the process of salvation - "I did this" and "I did that". The personal ego is still intact, and self-achievement and boastfulness is still alive and well. Zeal for God can thus quickly turn into self-preening religious smugness.

Instead we have a new way of being, a 'new and living way' where the rules are put aside in favor of developing a holy, gracious personal walk with God through the inner work of the Holy Spirit.

It is no longer a matter of festivals and Sabbaths, temples and tithes, and of not touching this, or not drinking that.

Colossians 2:20-23 MKJV (20) *If then you died with Christ from the elements of the world, why, as though living in the world, are you subject to its ordinances: (21) touch not, taste not, handle not; (22) which things are all for corruption in the using, according to the commands and doctrines of men? (23) These things indeed have a reputation of wisdom in self-imposed worship and humility, and unsparing severity of the body, but are not of any value for the satisfying of the flesh.*

This is all replaced by righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit!

Romans 14:17 MKJV *for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

Romans 10:5-8 All Our Spiritual Huffing And Puffing

Romans 10:5-8 MKJV *For Moses writes of the righteousness which is of the Law, "The man who does those things shall live by them." (6) But the righteousness of faith says this: "Do not say in your heart, Who shall ascend into Heaven?" that is, to bring Christ down; (7) or "Who shall descend into the deep?"; that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead. (8) But what does it say? "The Word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart"; that is, the Word of Faith which we proclaim;*

Christianity is not a matter of *doing* this or that, or of being very *high-notioned* and heavenly minded, or even being incredibly deep and meaningful - but rather is simply a matter of simply believing God, and especially believing what God has done in Christ.

The Law given by Moses consisted of 613 commandments of various shapes and sizes, all of which had to be kept and if they were all kept then they brought life. It was working at it, day after day, year after year, keeping the holy, righteous and just standard of human behavior (Romans 7:12) that was found in the Law. The problem was that due to sin, and its indwelling in human flesh, no one could keep the law. It was an impossible yoke, that neither the Jews of old, or even of Jesus' day were able to bear (Acts 15:10).

Acts 15:10-11 MKJV *Now therefore why do you tempt God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples, a yoke which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear? (11) But we believe that through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ we shall be saved, according to which manner they also believed.*

This idea of righteousness through law-keeping is deeply ingrained in many cultures, and people saturated with the idea of earning their way in life, and familiar with law and merit and “brownie points” tend to become legalistic when they adopt a religion. Grace is a hard concept for many. Islam and Judaism with their law codes and holy books are more comfortable for many people than relying on the work of a crucified Savior.

However the righteousness which is by faith is not performance based in any way at all. You do not have to live up to some high heavenly standard (*Do not say in your heart, Who shall ascend into Heaven?*) or go into the depths of complexity such as philosophy or psychoanalysis (or *"Who shall descend into the deep?"*).

Christianity is simple enough that it can be apprehended by soldiers like the centurion, to fishermen like Peter, to tax-collectors like Matthew and to prostitutes, lepers, outcasts and shepherds and yet is profound enough offer an ocean of truth to the magi or to intellectuals like Paul or to noblemen like Joseph or Arimathaea and Nicodemus.

Being spiritual is **not** about strenuously obeying some list of ever more difficult religious rules, or attaining to some insight, or having some heavenly experience. It appears to me that roughly 90% of people who go on and on about “being spiritual” advocate one of those three dead-end pathways – law-keeping, personal insight or mystical experience. But Paul, and the whole of the New Testament, says that these lead nowhere and will only result in spiritual frustration. But they are much beloved because they are measurable. We can tick off the rules we have kept, we can say we have “had the experience” or gained the insight or passed the theological test – yet all the while the self is not surrendered and the soul is still lost!

Christian faith does not depend on how many Greek verbs you know, or on how well you keep a church's list of rules, or on whether you have had this or that spiritual experience (most of which also occur in non-Christian religions). Christian faith depends on faith, hope and love.

If we are saved by works, by law, by effort, or by some insight or understanding then there must be a “pass mark”, some sort of a spiritual yardstick. Once we pass this point X then we can say for sure that we are saved.

Now Paul says, imagine that the spiritual standard is “above” in some way. Perhaps a high moral or spiritual or ethical standard or perhaps some high knowledge or mystical experience. Now if we set this “pass mark” high enough for some human being to reach, we will in effect be “bringing Christ down”. We would have to lower the bar (from the high Christ-standard) if we were to pass the test. That is in effect we would be bringing the high Christ-standard down to within our reach so we can be saved.

On the other hand if our spiritual task was “below” in some way. If it was to descend into the depths of God and of self-knowledge, and plumb the depths of sacrifice and service and of deepest humility and profoundest suffering. If we were to make our standard for salvation that we had to attain to the depths of Christ's humility, suffering and death- then we will quickly find that we cannot go there. We simply cannot take what He took. We cannot suffer as He suffered. Our sin-weighted souls would break in the attempt. We can only go a small fraction of the way, we would have to “raise Christ up from the dead again”, to make it easy enough for even a few souls to pass the test.

Wherever we set our spiritual standard it ends up being either in an impossible place (if it is set at the level of Jesus Christ) or it ends up being at a compromised and even blasphemous place (if it is some human-invented standard that is less than Christ-like).

As I keep saying – there is NO SPIRITUAL LADDER that we must ascend. We do not rise up by religious effort. We go directly to God through faith. There is no ladder, there is only faith, hope and love.

What then is the pathway to salvation? (8) *But what does it say? "The Word is near you, even in your mouth and in your heart"; that is, the Word of Faith which we proclaim;*

Salvation comes from receiving the Word of God in faith. You simply have to believe the gospel and you will be saved. It really is as simple as that. No list of rules, no heavenly experiences, and no deep mystical knowledge is required.

The word of God can be in our mouth and in our heart. It is near us, as near as a preacher, the radio or the Bible. It is as near as our memory of a Sunday School lesson, and as near as the testimony of our own conscience. We simply have to believe when God speaks to us in our inner selves and tells us to trust in Christ for salvation.

The righteousness that comes by faith is a personal impartation of Christ's righteousness. It comes to us personally through the faith connection. It is as we believe that we receive. It is God's love poured into us through the Holy Ghost (Romans 5:1-5).

The whole system of spiritual ranking is demolished. Legalism is finished. Rule-keeping is dead (though we are put onto a path to holiness) and all straining and stressing after this or that is done away with. Just like Peter stepping out of the small boat on Lake Galilee, and onto the stormy sea, we believe, even shakily and are saved.

Christianity is a faith and not a religion. We don't need priests or sacrifices or altars or holy vestments or some great and wondrous ceremony in order to be saved. We simply need to believe. We need to believe that Jesus is Lord, and that He was raised from the dead for our salvation (Romans 10:9-13). God is all around us, and we just need to grasp onto His saving hand. And the act of doing that, of believing that His Hand is there, and can be safely held onto – that is what we call saving faith. All our spiritual huffing and puffing has been replaced by simple trust in the gospel.

Romans 10:9-13 **The Requirements For Salvation**

Romans 10:9-13 MKJV *Because if you confess the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. (10) For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses unto salvation. (11) For the Scripture says, "Everyone believing on Him shall not be put to shame." (12) For there is no difference both of Jew and of Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call on Him. (13) For everyone, "whoever shall call on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

God will save “all who call on Him” indeed 'whoever shall call on the name of the Lord will be saved’. God is clearly willing to save anyone who calls on His name! God wants people to be saved and is “not willing that any should perish”.

1 Timothy 2:3-4 MKJV *For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, (4) who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.*

2 Peter 3:9 MKJV *The Lord is not slow concerning His promise, as some count slowness, but is long-suffering toward us, not purposing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.*

There are also many verses that say 'whoever' believes is saved, the best known of which is probably John 3:16

John 3:16 MKJV *For God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

Salvation is thus like a narrow road or gateway that whoever enters in is saved. But many miss that gateway!

Matthew 7:13-14 MKJV *Go in through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many there are who go in through it. (14) Because narrow is the gate and constricted is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.*

Romans 10 goes on later to talk about the need for a preacher so that people may hear, and know the way to salvation- that is be able to find the narrow way. The disease called sin has only one cure and that is the cross of Christ and all other remedies are worthless. But the divine remedy works in all cases, even the worst of cases such as Saul the persecutor who became Paul the apostle.

1 Timothy 1:15-16 MKJV *Faithful is the Word and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. (16) But for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show forth all long-suffering, as a pattern to those being about to believe on Him to life everlasting.*

We see that God suffers long with sinners, with what Paul calls “vessels prepared for destruction” in Romans 9, in order that they might repent and become glorious saints of God. God is not willing that any should perish and consigns no one to Hell before the final judgment. The offer of salvation is open as long as anyone lives.

What then does a person have to believe in order to be saved? Romans 10 gives two requirements, the first of which is that they must believe that Jesus Christ is Lord - and be able to “confess” this as the Truth:

Romans 10:9,10 *Because if you confess the Lord Jesus, and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved. (10) For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth one confesses unto salvation.*

1 John 4:15 MKJV *Whoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him and he in God.*

To confess the Lord Jesus means to own up to Him, to say that He is your Lord and Savior and that you identify with Him. You own Him as your Lord, your Boss and as the ruler of your life whom you absolutely follow. According to Thayer's Greek Lexicon the Greek word *homologeō* means to confess, declare openly, to agree with completely, to profess that one is a worshiper of, to praise, to celebrate...

Now to openly declare Christ as Lord in the Roman world meant not to accept Caesar as Lord and brought persecution. And to confess Christ as Lord and not Zeus or Artemis in the Greek world also brought wrath as one was seen and “not pious” as in fact an “atheist” for not honoring the traditional gods. And to confess Jesus Christ as Lord in Israel was to risk the wrath of the Sanhedrin. If we own Christ we must own Him publicly - at home, in the office, at school, even in the military.

The second requirement in Romans 10 is to have a heart belief in Christ's work on the cross, that is His atoning death and life-giving resurrection. *and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead,*

you shall be saved. .. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness

By belief in the resurrection I do not think that Paul meant mere assent to a historical fact. For the guards and the Sanhedrin believed that Jesus actually rose from the dead – but concocted a scheme to say otherwise (Matthew 28:11-15). No its not just belief in the head, mere historical knowledge so to speak, it is belief in the heart, a deep existential grasping of the cross and resurrection (for if Jesus is to rise, He first must have died for our sins).

We have to treasure the cross, and celebrate the new life brought to us by Jesus' resurrection from the dead. This heart belief in the atoning work of Christ is the first fruit of the renewed mind. Some of the brightest philosophers of Athens scoffed at the resurrection from the dead (Acts 17:32) because it offends the natural mind. To the unregenerate mind, the cross is a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Greeks (1 Corinthians 1:23).

1 Corinthians 1:21-25 MKJV (21) *For since, in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom did not know God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe. (22) For the Jews ask for a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom; (23) but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness. (24) But to them, the called-out ones, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. (25) Because the foolish thing of God is wiser than men, and the weak thing of God is stronger than men.*

So when someone comes to a heart belief in the cross and resurrection they have come to a knowledge that is not naturally possible, it is a knowledge that only the Holy Spirit can work in your heart. The moment you come to that belief is the moment you have passed through the narrow gate and entered into salvation.

Romans 10:14-17

Faith Comes By Hearing

Romans 10:14-17 MKJV *How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without preaching? (15) And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace and bring glad tidings of good things!" (16) But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our report?" (17) Then faith is of hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.*

The starting premise is that “all who call on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 9:13). However in order to call on the name of the Lord they must first believe that calling on His name will be effective. And before they can believe in the effectiveness of His name, they must have heard of Him. And in order to hear of Jesus they must have it announced to them through some form of preaching. And in order to hear the preacher, then the preacher must first be sent out from those who possess the gospel.

Thus everything follows from sending the preacher. If no preacher is sent, then no one is saved. So the feet of the gospel herald are “blessed feet” because they bring the message that gives eternal life to the world! Indeed there is always a greater need for gospel heralds than there is a supply!

Matthew 9:37-38 MKJV *Then He said to His disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the laborers are few. (38) Therefore pray to the Lord of the harvest that He will send out laborers into His harvest.*

But sometimes missionaries, prophets and scribes are sent to no effect. Jesus' final withering blast at the Pharisees in the gospel of Matthew includes the following:

Matthew 23:34-35 MKJV *Therefore, behold, I send prophets and wise men and scribes to you. And you will kill and crucify some of them. And some of them you will scourge in your synagogues and persecute from city to city; (35) so that on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Berachiah, whom you killed between the temple and the altar.*

Isaiah, who ministering to Israel during a time of rapid spiritual decline cried out: "Lord, who has believed our report?" (Romans 10:16 above)

In general the Bible attributes unbelief to the hearer, rather than to the messenger being inept. This is clearly evident when even such a brilliant communicator, poet and prophet as Isaiah could not break through the spiritual lethargy of his day. Unbelief is seen as the outcome of being hardened in sin and having a conscience that is defiled. Satan clearly has a hand in this process.

Titus 1:15 MKJV *To the pure all things are pure. But to those who are defiled and unbelieving nothing is pure, but even their mind and conscience is defiled.*

2 Corinthians 4:2-4 MKJV (2) *But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor adulterating the Word of God, but by the revelation of the truth commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. (3) But also if our gospel is hidden, it is hidden to those being lost, (4) in whom the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving ones, so that the light of the glorious gospel of Christ (who is the image of God) should not dawn on them.*

But unbelief is not necessarily final and total, because unbelievers, even of the most difficult kind, can become believers:

1 Timothy 1:12-15 MKJV *And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who strengthened me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry-- (13) the one who before was a blasphemer and a persecutor and insolent. But I obtained mercy, because being ignorant, I did it in unbelief. (14) And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with faith and love in Christ Jesus. (15) Faithful is the Word and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.*

I find it interesting the Bible never blames the preacher for the non-responsiveness of the audience! In fact I cannot find a single example anywhere that says anything like "because Jeremiah was so boring no one believed". The Scriptures do not place any obligation on the evangelist to be interesting, eloquent, or entertaining. They are simply required to proclaim the cross of Christ and His Kingdom! The obligation is always on the hearer:

Luke 8:18 MKJV *Therefore be careful how you hear. For whoever has, to him shall be given; and whoever has not, from him shall be taken even that which he seems to have.*

Matthew 7:24-29 MKJV *Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on a rock. (25) And the rain came down, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house. And it did not fall, for it was founded on a rock. (26) And everyone who hears these sayings of Mine and does not do them shall be compared to a foolish man who built his house on the sand. (27) And the rain came down, and the floods came, and the wind blew and beat on that house. And it fell, and great was its fall. (28) And it happened, when Jesus had ended these sayings, that the people were astonished at His doctrine. (29) For He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.*

Paul then concludes with “so faith comes through hearing”. Now you might have expected him to say “faith comes through preaching”. However Paul does not say that! For to Paul the Word must be received, it must be implanted in the heart, it must be heard deeply in the soul. It must not just vibrate the tympani in the eardrum. It must go deep down into the soul if it is to result in spiritual life. This meaning to “to hear” is like the Old English expression “to harken” or the military term “listen up”. The Shema is a famous Jewish recitation of the words of Moses in the sixth chapter of Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 6:4-7 JPS HEAR, O ISRAEL: THE LORD OUR GOD, THE LORD IS ONE. (5) *And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.* (6) *And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart;* (7) *and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.*

So faith comes by hearing, by listening with the inner man, by harkening with the conscience (which is where we know truth), and by attending with one's entire soul to who God is and to what God says – and especially to the gospel.

Paul concludes with “and hearing by the Word of God”. The Greek for “word” here is *rhema* or utterance and means primarily the preached or spoken word of the prophets or the gospel messenger, the preached word. It is the immediate verbal uttered word of God encountering the person. Our souls are opened up to hear when the preacher's word comes to us - we are awakened, we listen deeply and we grow in faith. It is the proclaimed word of God that opens the ear, and not the word sitting idle in a book on a shelf.

Romans 10:18-21

ButHave They Not Heard?

Romans 10:18-21 MKJV *But I say, Have they not heard? Yes indeed, their voice went out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. (19) But I say, Did not Israel know? First Moses says, "I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are no people, and by a foolish nation I will anger you." (20) But Isaiah is very bold and says, "I was found by those who did not seek Me, I became known to those who did not ask after Me." (21) But to Israel He says, "All day long I have stretched forth My hands to a disobeying and gainsaying people."*

The question that started off this whole section since the beginning of Romans chapter 9 is the question of the lack of salvation of the Jews - which leads Paul to discuss the question of the efficacy of the gospel. It looks as if “the Word of God has failed” (Romans 9:6). So this is the burning question: *Does the unbelief of the Jews indicate that the word of God has been ineffective in producing salvation?* In other words has the word of God “returned void” ?

Isaiah 55:10-11 MKJV *For as the rain comes down, and the snow from the heavens, and does not return there, but waters the earth, and makes it bring out and bud, and give seed to the sower and bread to the eater; (11) so shall My Word be, which goes out of My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall certainly do what I sent it to do.*

So Paul goes through a long series of arguments to show that God's Word has not been ineffective and useless.

1. Not all who are of Israel are “the true Israel” but only a holy remnant called “the children of promise” (Romans 9:1-8)
2. Salvation is not an automatic entitlement of the Jews but is God's covenant initiative and choice and He has mercy on whom He has mercy and compassion of whom He has compassion. (Romans 9:9-18)
3. God is the Potter and Israel has no right to question His working or impugn the effectiveness of His Word. (Romans 9:19-26)
4. Those called of God are extracted as a remnant out of all nations, some are saved among the Jews and some are saved from among the Gentiles (Romans 9:24-29)
5. Israel did not obtain God's righteousness of faith because they sought their own righteousness by works (Romans 9:30-10:8)
6. Israel was not saved because it did not believe, and it did not believe because it refused to “hear” the Word of God (Romans 10:9-17)
7. Therefore the problem is not with the word of God but with those who refuse to listen to it and believe it!

The only refuge left by which Israel can defend its unbelief is to say “but we never heard in the first place – so how can we be blamed for not believing?” So Paul puts the question as a rhetorical device and then convincingly answers it:

Romans 10:18 MKJV *But I say, Have they not heard? Yes indeed, their voice went out into all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.*

The last part of this verse is a quote from Psalm 19 and refers to the revelation of God that is contained in nature - and in particular in the Heavens:

Psalms 19:1-4 MKJV *To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of David. The heavens declare the glory of God; and the expanse proclaims His handiwork. (2) Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night reveals knowledge. (3) There is no speech nor are there words; their voice is not heard. (4) Their line has gone out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun,*

There is a natural feeling for God we get when we observe the night sky or ponder the works of God in nature. This natural sense of awe is God speaking to us in our inner self and in fact it is so loud and clear that sinful mankind has had to actively repress it:

Romans 1:18-23 MKJV *For the wrath of God is revealed from Heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, (19) because the thing which may be known of God is clearly revealed within them, for God revealed it to them. (20) For the unseen things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being realized by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, for them to be without excuse. (21) Because, knowing God, they did not glorify Him as God, neither were thankful. But they became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (22) Professing to be wise, they became fools (23) and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and birds, and four-footed animals, and creeping things.*

Note the emphasis Paul puts on this clarity of natural revelation: “clearly revealed with them” , “for God clearly revealed it to them” , “the unseen things...are clearly seen..even His eternal power and Godhead”, “for them to be without excuse”. There is no excuse for anyone because God testifies to use both in nature and within our souls, about His eternal power and Godhead. Revelation calls this the “eternal gospel” which will be preached in Tribulation times when all other access to the gospel seems to have been prevented:

Revelation 14:6-7 MKJV *And I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those dwelling on the earth, even to every nation and kindred and tongue and people, (7) saying with a great voice, Fear God and give glory to Him! For the hour of His judgment has come. And worship Him who made the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.*

All people everywhere are called to respond to God's self-revelation in nature and in their conscience and to: “Worship Him who made the heaven and the earth, and the sea, and the fountains of waters.” and to refrain from idolatrous worship of the works of their hands. There is enough light available for a spiritually sensitive person to have faith in God and forsake idols (as Abraham did without a Bible, a church or any other help).

The answer to the question “But what about the people in the jungle who have never heard of Jesus” is that God has revealed Himself through nature and in their conscience. It seems that it is somehow possible that they can follow God in an Abrahamic fashion and worship the one true Creator God with reverence and awe and at least believe the 'eternal gospel' proclaimed by the angel.

I am not taking a 'universalist' position here and saying that all are saved, nor am I saying that missionary work is not necessary. Jesus clearly tells us that the Harvest requires laborers (Matthew 9:37,38). However I am saying that enough light is available in nature for an honest seeker to connect to God by faith as Abraham did. Paul makes that very clear in Romans 1 as we saw above. Mankind is “without excuse”, because they have all had the gospel proclaimed to them “by the things that are made” and it is “clearly revealed within them” by God's inner work in each sensitized human conscience. No one will be able to stand before the throne and say “ I had no idea that there was a Creator God that I was supposed to worship”.

Back to the Jews.. Paul is saying that the Jews had every chance to believe and simply chose not to do so! Paul then turns to the difference in response between the Jews (who did not believe) and the Gentiles (who believed in large numbers). He uses three different Old Testament quotes to show God's purposes in this:

1. God was using the Gentiles to make Israel spiritually jealous (Romans 10:19); and even in their unbelief God was still trying to reach them by using the faith of the Gentiles to make them jealous so they might repent. (Romans 11:11-14)
2. God was able to save even those who did not seek Him and to make Himself known to those who did not ask after Him – such as the Gentiles. (Romans 10:20)
3. God had given Israel plenty of chances and 'all day long' had stretched out His hands to a stubborn and disobedient people (Romans 10:21)

So the Israelites were without excuse. God had done everything to help them understand, and God was still trying to reach them (via the Gentiles) yet they were hardening their hearts and still not believing. The word of God had not failed. The failure was with the sinful human heart that 'suppressed the truth in unrighteousness' (Romans 1:18).

Questions about the efficacy of the gospel such as: “Why are not all the folk in so-called Christian nations saved?” Or “Why is the church growing so fast in the global South and dying out in Europe?” Or even “Why isn't the whole world saved by now?” all boil down to the following basic answer:

The gospel is still powerful to save all who call upon the name of the Lord (Romans 10:13) and the gospel has gone out to the ends of the world (Romans 10:18) but it has not often encountered faith, instead it has often encountered unbelief.

The writer to the Hebrews puts it this way:

Hebrews 4:1-2 MKJV *Therefore, a promise being left to enter into His rest, let us fear lest any of you should seem to come short of it. (2) For also we have had the gospel preached, as well as them. But the Word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.*

Romans 11:1-5

Israel Has Not Been Rejected

Romans 11:1-5 MKJV *I say then, Did not God put away His people? Let it not be said! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. (2) God did not thrust out His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture said in Elijah, how he pleaded with God against Israel, saying, (3) "Lord, they killed Your prophets and dug down Your altars, and I am left alone, and they seek my life." (4) But what does the Divine answer say to him? "I have reserved to Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (5) Even so then, also in this present time a remnant according to the election of grace has come into being.*

Paul then asks “Are all the Jews rejected by God?” and firmly answers “No, and on two counts”. Firstly Paul himself is a Jew and is saved - and secondly, that God always preserves a saved and faithful remnant.

The illustration of this is that even during the worst time of Jewish apostasy, during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, when Elijah thought that he alone was left, God had in fact kept seven thousand who had not bowed their knees to Baal. That is, no apostasy is so bad, or so total, that God cannot preserve a faithful remnant for Himself (which is encouraging news given the falling away from the standards of godliness we see today!)

Paul says emphatically: *God did not thrust out His people whom He foreknew.* Paul always sees God as coming into the world to save sinners. The gospel is more inclusive than it is exclusive. The New Testament is full of terms such as “everyone”, “whosoever”, and “all” making out that salvation, prayer and the Holy Spirit are widely available by faith to all genders, classes, ethnicities, and language groups.

So we can see that God's salvation is more inclusive (including of others into the family of God) than exclusive (shutting people out) and even the most unlikely people and worst sinners (such as Saul the persecutor) can be saved. I am certain that God will not shut the door on the humblest person who truly believes:

Matthew 12:20 MKJV *He will not break a bruised reed, and He will not quench a smoking wick, until He sends out judgment to victory.*

As the old hymn goes:

There's a wideness in God's mercy
like the wideness of the sea;
there's a kindness in his justice,
which is more than liberty.
There is welcome for the sinner,
and more graces for the good;

there is mercy with the Savior;
there is healing in his blood.....

For the love of God is broader
than the measure of man's mind;
and the heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind.
If our love were but more faithful,
we should take him at his word;
and our life would be thanksgiving
for the goodness of the Lord.

Words: Frederick William Faber, 1862;

The wideness of God's mercy and the "narrow gate" seem ever at odds with each other, but the condition of mercy is calling on God in repentance and faith. The wide mercy of "whosoever" is always coupled with a conditional verb such as: "calls on", "believes" or "confesses":

John 3:15 MKJV *so that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

John 12:46 MKJV *I have come as a Light into the world, so that whoever believes on Me should not remain in darkness.*

1 John 4:15 MKJV *Whoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwells in him and he in God.*

Romans 10:12-13 MKJV *For there is no difference both of Jew and of Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call on Him. (13) For everyone, "whoever shall call on the name of the Lord will be saved."*

Romans 1:16 MKJV *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

Therefore God did not reject the Israelites, in fact if any of them repent and believe they will most certainly be saved. They are His people, who He foreknew. God has attached himself to Israel but Israel through its unbelief has detached itself from God. Yet even this refractory stubbornness is not final - for God is able to rescue a remnant:

Or do you not know what the Scripture said in Elijah, how he pleaded with God against Israel, saying, (3) "Lord, they killed Your prophets and dug down Your altars, and I am left alone, and they seek my life." (4) But what does the Divine answer say to him? "I have reserved to Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." (5) Even so then, also in this present time a remnant according to the election of grace has come into being.

My great-grandmother was from an exceedingly wealthy Jewish family and became a Christian as a teenager, through the witness of her nanny. Later she married a Scottish doctor and went as a missionary to China alongside Hudson Taylor and his famous "70". She was of course disinherited by her family for this! So my great-grandmother was part of God's remnant among the Jews. There will always be some Jews who find faith in Jesus Christ for the sake of His promises with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

From the days of Paul until now only a relatively small fraction of the Jewish population has even been saved (despite some major efforts to convert them) - *in this present time a remnant according to the election of grace has come into being.*

This remnant is God's gracious act to choose some for salvation despite the deep resistance of so many Jewish families to the gospel (we will look further at why this remnant is 'of grace' in the next study).

So modern-day Israel has not been abandoned by God, nor is it a nation full of Christian believers. It is a largely unbelieving nation, that has some, a holy remnant, who have found faith in God. This will be so until the "time of the Gentiles" finishes and the gospel has been preached as a witness to all nations (Matthew 24:14), then the Jews shall all be saved (Romans 11:25-28), and the end shall come (Matthew 24:14).

Romans 11:5-10

God Gave Them.....

Romans 11:5-10 MKJV *Even so then, also in this present time a remnant according to the election of grace has come into being. (6) But if by grace, then it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it is of works, then it is no more of grace; otherwise work is no more work. (7) What then? Israel has not obtained that which it seeks, but the election obtained it, and the rest were hardened (8) even as it is written, "God gave to them a spirit of slumber, eyes not seeing, and ears not hearing" until this day. (9) And David said, "Let their table become for a snare and a trap and a stumbling block and a recompense to them. (10) Let their eyes be darkened so that they may not see, and their back always bowing."*

At first glance the expression: "God gave to them a spirit of slumber, eyes not seeing, and ears not hearing" seems like God predestining a whole group of people to lostness and to eternal punishment. However on closer inspection we find out that the expression "God gave to them" or "God gave them over to..." is used elsewhere in Romans to refer to God's reluctant reaction to persistent unrepentant human sin:

Romans 1:21-32 MKJV *(21) Because, knowing God, they did not glorify Him as God, neither were thankful. But they became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. (22) Professing to be wise, they became fools (23) and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man, and birds, and four-footed animals, and creeping things. (24) **Therefore God also gave them up** to uncleanness through the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their own bodies between themselves. (25) For they changed the truth of God into a lie, and they worshiped and served the created thing more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. (26) **For this cause, God gave them up to dishonorable affections.** For even their women changed the natural use into that which is against nature. (27) And likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust toward one another; males with males working out shamefulness, and receiving in themselves the recompense which was fitting for their error. (28) And even as they did not think fit to have God in their knowledge, **God gave them over to a reprobate mind**, to do the things not right, (29) being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; being full of envy, murder, quarrels, deceit, evil habits, becoming whisperers, (30) backbiters, haters of God, insolent, proud, braggarts, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, (31) undiscerning, perfidious, without natural affection, unforgiving, unmerciful; (32) who, knowing the righteous order of God, that those practicing such things are worthy of death, not only do them, but have pleasure in those practicing them.*

In other words, in this context, the expression "God gave them" is His giving in to their wicked natures - and allowing them to follow the downward gravitational force of their own sin and depravity. So we see God's sovereign action "giving them over to" is simply His just and righteous response to stubborn human sin. It is giving people what they want, even though it is evil, and damns them:

In Acts it is used to refer to Israel's sinful choice of a king:

Acts 13:21 MKJV *And afterward they asked for a king. And God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years.*

And in Revelation it is used to refer to the people choosing to be ruled by the Anti-Christ "beast" figure:

Revelation 17:17 MKJV *For God gave into their hearts to do his mind, and to act with one mind, and to give their kingdom to the beast until the Words of God will be fulfilled.*

In all the above verses we see a picture of fallen humanity clamoring for its idols, its lusts and perversions and for a "strong man" to rule over them and refusing the glory of God that is revealed to them in Christ Jesus.

So what happened to the Israelites? Why did God give to them *"a spirit of slumber, eyes not seeing, and ears not hearing"* ? Because they refused to listen to Moses, the law and the prophets and to His revelation in Christ Jesus and instead chose their own laws and the rules of men, justifying themselves by their own works. Israel received so much revelation, and refused so much revelation, that it became deeply hardened to God! This is surely a lesson for the church in Western lands today! It is also a lesson to many Muslim lands which were "once Christian" (such as Egypt, Syria and Turkey) but which turned to the teachings of the Koran and which have remained in stubborn defiance of the witness of Christ to this very day!

Spiritual darkness comes from persistently refusing the light! *"Let their eyes be darkened so that they may not see"* is a curse pronounced on those who simply will not see. It refers in particular to those Jews at the time of Jesus who gave assent to the crucifixion of Christ and the persecution of the Church and comes from Psalm 69:

Psalms 69:21-28 MKJV *They also gave Me gall for my food; and in My thirst they gave Me vinegar to drink. (22) Let their table become a snare before them; and to those at ease a trap. (23) Let their eyes be darkened, so that they do not see; and make their loins shake without ceasing. (24) Pour out Your wrath on them, and let the glow of Your anger take hold of them. (25) Let their dwelling be wasted; let none dwell in their tents. (26) For they persecute him whom You have stricken, and they talk to the grief of those You pierced. (27) Add iniquity to their iniquity, and let them not come into Your righteousness. (28) Let them be blotted out of the Book of Life, and not be written with the righteous.*

Verses 21 and 26 refer specifically to the cross and Matthew quotes verse 21 in his account of the cross (Matthew 27:34). Psalm 69 indicates a spiritual state of having no kindness, and in fact having deep contempt and hatred, for God's Son. Soon after the cross, the Romans invaded, Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed, the dwelling of the Jews was wasted and the land became empty with "none dwelling in their tents" for thousands of years.

Yet God spared some! The 'elect' were saved by grace!

Romans 11:5-7 MKJV *Even so then, also in this present time a remnant according to the election of grace has come into being. (6) But if by grace, then it is no more of works; otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it is of works, then it is no more of grace; otherwise work is no more work. (7) What then? Israel has not obtained that which it seeks, but the election obtained it, and the rest were hardened*

Israel as a whole did not obtain what it sought (v.7) - salvation, because it sought it by works. Some were saved, a spiritually sensitive few, touched by the cross, believed and were saved. These Paul calls "the elect" in order to emphasize the Sovereign hand of God.

Paul makes a complete distinction between grace and works. It is almost the same distinction as that between a wage and a gift. The works approach to salvation see Heaven as a "wage" that is owed to the righteous and which is earned by many, many good deeds.

However the grace approach to salvation sees Heaven as a free gift that God can give to anyone He chooses and He chooses to give it to all who believe! Works follow later, out of gratitude and as a good and fitting expression of our new nature in Christ.

Thus the two approaches are not even in the least bit compatible. If salvation is earned, then it is certainly not a free gift, and if salvation is a free gift then it is certainly not earned in any way.

To keep refusing the free gift that God has provided and to say instead " No, I will earn my own salvation thank you very much" is to harden one's heart. That is what the Israelites did - *and the rest were hardened*. However as we will see later, this hardening is not permanent and we may be close to the day soon when "all Israel will be saved" (Romans 11:26).

Therefore do not be stubborn. Do not persist in sin. Do not resist the voice of God when He speaks, and do not resist, grieve or quench the Holy Spirit.

Hebrews 3:7-13 MKJV *Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, "Today if you will hear His voice, (8) do not harden your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness, (9) when your fathers tempted Me, proved Me, and saw My works forty years. (10) Therefore I was grieved with that generation and said, They always err in their heart, and they have not known My ways. (11) So I swore in My wrath, They shall not enter into My rest." (12) Take heed, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. (13) But exhort one another daily, while it is called today, lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*

Romans 11:11-15

Life From The Dead

Romans 11:11-15 MKJV *I say then, Did they not stumble that they fall? Let it not be! But by their slipping away came salvation to the nations, to provoke them to jealousy. (12) But if their slipping away is the riches of the world, and their default is the riches of the nations, how much more their fullness? (13) For I speak to you, the nations; since I am the apostle of the nations, I glorify my ministry; (14) if by any means I may provoke those who are my flesh to jealousy, and might save some of them. (15) For if their casting away is the reconciling of the world, what is the reception except life from the dead?*

Paul has a rather strange argument here that is common in Jewish rabbinical thought, called "from the lesser to the greater". If the lesser event – the slipping away of the Jews from salvation, results in the salvation of the rest of the world, then the greater event, that is the Jews coming back to God, must result in something even greater than the salvation of the nations, indeed it will result in "life from the dead".

This makes the Jews a sort of prophetic litmus test or time clock as if what happens to them has cosmic implications.

Now what does Paul mean by "life from the dead"? Does he mean a revival, a time of spiritual renewal for the entire world, once the Jews come to Christ? Does Paul imply the resurrection from the dead will take place shortly after the Jews are saved in the End Times? Does "life from the dead" mean the spiritual revival of Israel as in the Valley of Dry Bones in Ezekiel 37?

Ezekiel 37:1-14 MKJV *The hand of Jehovah was on me, and brought me by the Spirit of Jehovah, and made me rest in the midst of a valley, and it was full of bones. (2) And He made me pass among them all around. And behold, very many were on the face of the valley. And lo, they were very dry. (3) And he said to me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord Jehovah, You know. (4) Again He said to me, Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, O dry bones, hear the Word of Jehovah. (5) So says the Lord Jehovah to these bones: Behold, I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. (6) And I will lay sinews on you, and will bring up flesh on you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live. And you shall know that I am Jehovah. (7) So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I prophesied, there was a noise. And behold, a shaking! And the bones came near, a bone to its bone. (8) And I watched. And behold! The sinews and the flesh came up on them, and the skin covered them above. But there was no breath in them. (9) And He said to me, Prophecy to the Spirit, prophesy, son of man, and say to the Spirit, So says the Lord Jehovah: Come from the four winds, O Spirit, and breathe on these dead ones so that they may live. (10) So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the Spirit came into them, and they lived and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army. (11) And He said to me, Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, Our bones are dried and our hope is lost; we are cut off by ourselves. (12) Therefore prophesy and say to them, So says the Lord Jehovah: Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up out of your graves, and will bring you into the land of Israel. (13) And you shall know that I am Jehovah when I have opened your graves, O My people, and have brought you up out of your graves. (14) And I shall put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. And you shall know that I Jehovah have spoken and have done it, says Jehovah.*

Now many prophecies in Scripture have double, triple or even quadruple fulfillments – and this is one of them. It was partially fulfilled by the return of the exiles from Babylon, it is still being fulfilled as the Jews return to their own land today. In the end it will be fulfilled in the End Times when the Spirit finally comes upon Israel with power. Today the bones are “back together” but there is no spiritual life in them yet and we are waiting for that heavenly wind to blow! Just after chapter 37 are chapters 38 and 39 – Gog and Magog! And after that the Temple is rebuilt. So if the Ezekiel order is the prophetic order then we can expect a return of the Jews to their land and to Christ and a might move of the Holy Spirit among them just before the Gog and Magog event and the New Temple. Now the signs are that a Gog and Magog style invasion of Israel by a combined Islamic jihad of Muslim nations is not too many years away. Some time before then the Holy Spirit will visit Israel with salvation!

Paul is really struggling with the falling away of the Jews here: *I say then, Did they not stumble that they fall? Let it not be!* It cannot be permanent! It is not total, God will visit them again – and then the whole world will shake with Holy Spirit power! There is a common theme that God allows even good people to fall – but only so far, and then raises them up again:

Psalms 37:23-24 MKJV *The steps of a good man are ordered by Jehovah; and He delights in his way. (24) Though he fall, he shall not be cast down; for Jehovah upholds his hand.*

Proverbs 24:16 MKJV *for a just one falls seven times, and rises up again; but the wicked shall fall into evil.*

Daniel 11:33-35 MKJV *And those who understand among the people shall teach many; yet they shall fall by the sword, and by flame, by exile, and spoil, for days. (34) And when they stumble, they shall be helped with a little help, but many will join them, with hypocrisy. (35) And many of those who understand shall stumble, to refine and purge them, and to make white, to the time of the end. Because it is still for the appointed time.*

So the Jews have fallen – but only so far, and only for so long, and God will raise them up to salvation, as if He were bringing them up from the grave, and giving new life to dry bones!

Paul then makes another strange statement – that he was preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, in order to save the Jews. Paul's idea was that the Jews would be so bitterly provoked by seeing salvation come to the Gentiles that they would turn to Christ! It is a bit like saying “If that fool can do it, surely I can too!”. Or when parents say to a child “even your little sister can do that!” in order to provoke them into doing it themselves! Paul thought that the Jews had such a low opinion of the Gentile nations that they would say “if they can receive the Holy Spirit, surely I can too!”. They would be so incensed with spiritual jealousy that they would investigate the claims of Christ!

13) For I speak to you, the nations; since I am the apostle of the nations, I glorify my ministry; (14) if by any means I may provoke those who are my flesh to jealousy, and might save some of them.

I think Paul knew that this tactic might not be terribly successful for his phrase “might save some of them” does not seem very hopeful. Paul still knows that only a remnant will be saved.

This raises the question about ministry being 'not worth it' if only a few are saved. Many ministries are not spectacularly successful and many a pastor tries this or that in his community so that he “might save some of them”. Paul never saw a great revival among the Jews – even though he was a great apostle. He saw revival for a couple of years in Ephesus, and perhaps in some other places as well, but it was rare - even for Paul. In each situation God has His timing when He will bring “life from the dead” and until then we are simply called to be faithful!

Romans 11:16-24

The Olive Tree Of God

Romans 11:16-24 MKJV *For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, also the branches. (17) And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and became a sharer of the root and the fatness of the olive tree with them, (18) do not boast against the branches. But if you boast, it is not you that bears the root, but the root bears you. (19) You will say then, The branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in. (20) Well, because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be high-minded, but fear. (21) For if God did not spare the natural branches, fear lest He also may not spare you either! (22) Behold then the kindness, and the severity of God; on those having fallen, severity; but on you, kindness, if you continue in the kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off. (23) And those also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in. For God is able to graft them in again. (24) For if you were cut out of the natural wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree; how much more these being according to nature will be grafted into their own olive-tree?*

In this theological illustration of Paul's Israel is the natural olive tree and the “holy root”, and the Gentiles are the wild olive tree and the “branches”. The purpose is to warn the Gentile Roman Christians to a) fear God b) respect Israel and c) continue in faith. A secondary point is that God does not select people according to their ethnicity, but according to their faith.

The olive tree is an ancient symbol of spirituality, with olive oil being a symbol of anointing (Exodus 29:7), healing (James 5:14) and of the Holy Spirit (Zechariah 4:1-12, Matthew 25:1-13) and the olive tree being a symbol of “spiritual Israel” (Jeremiah 11:16, Hosea 14:6, Romans 11:17,24).

Paul sees Israel as the source of holiness in the Church. Holiness spreads outward from the first part of the lump to the whole, or upwards from the root to the branches. *For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, also the branches.* Things that were “most holy” could transmit holiness to whatever they touched:

Exodus 29:37 MKJV *You shall make an atonement for the altar seven days, and sanctify it. And it shall be a most holy altar. Whatever touches the altar shall be holy.* By this principle holy Israel “sanctified” the Gentiles who were grafted into the Church.

Paul's illustration is agriculturally unusual. Generally the wild olive was the sturdy root and the fruitful cultivated olive was grafted on to it. To do it the other way around (a fruitful cultivated root with a wild olive grafted on top) would produce a scraggly and unfruitful plant. No one would do it! The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia says the following: *As a rule the wild olive is but a shrub, with small leaves, a stem more or less prickly, and a small, hard drupe with but little or no oil. That a wild olive branch should be grafted into a fruitful tree would be a proceeding useless and contrary to Nature*

So Paul is using a startling (and almost insulting) illustration to make his point that the Gentile church was a mere scraggly offshoot grafted onto a magnificent Jewish root! When the true stock was grafted back on – that is when the fruit and oil would come forth! The point was that the Gentiles were not to despise the Jews - *“do not boast against the branches. But if you boast, it is not you that bears the root, but the root bears you.”*

The root of Christianity is Jewish – the patriarchs, the prophets, the various authors of the books of the Bible, the twelve apostles, and the leaders of the early Church were all Jews - and of course Jesus Himself was Jewish. The rest of us are grafted into this Jewish root.

However, as we have seen, most Jews did not believe the gospel. They thought their religion was “good enough” and needed no improvement. They did not believe in the revelation that came in Jesus Christ, and because of this unbelief they were “broken off”.

Paul calls this “the kindness and severity of God” - *Behold then the kindness, and the severity of God; on those having fallen, severity; but on you, kindness, if you continue in the kindness. Otherwise you also will be cut off.*

If the Gentiles refuse to believe they will meet the same fate as the Jews – falling from grace and being “cut off” from salvation. Therefore the Gentiles are not to take salvation for granted, as if it was some sort of expected right, but rather they were to walk in the fear of God: *Do not be high-minded, but fear. (21) For if God did not spare the natural branches, fear lest He also may not spare you either!*

It is as if God is a gardener who prunes away all unfruitful branches. This aspect of God's character is also reflected in the parable of the vine-dresser in John 15:1-8

John 15:1-8 MKJV *I am the True Vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser. (2) Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away. And every one that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bring forth more fruit. (3) Now you are clean through the Word which I have spoken to you. (4) Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you unless you abide in Me. (5) I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, the same brings forth much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (6) If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered. And they gather and cast them into the fire, and they are burned. (7) If you abide in Me, and My Words abide in you, you shall ask what you will, and it shall be done to you. (8) In this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, so you shall be My disciples.*

The common element in both parables is that God wants us to live fruitful lives, abiding in Him, being joined

to both the Christ-Vine and the Church-Olive Tree by faith. However in both parables God is also severe on the useless, dry and unfruitful branches and they are “cut off” and burned.

There is a lesson here – if we abide in Christ, then the kindness and grace of God flows into us and we bear much fruit, but if we refuse to believe then kindness and grace cannot flow to us, and if kindness cannot flow, then the only alternative is severity. The dry dead branches are cut off and thrown away!

The proper response to this is holy fear, that is a diligent carefulness about one's spiritual life to keep it within the bounds set by God and to obey His commandments. God is the source of 100% of our spiritual life and so we must stay close to Him!

Finally Paul says that the Jews have not fallen completely, they can in fact be grafted back in again once they believe and it will be a natural fit:

23) *And those also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in. For God is able to graft them in again.*

(24) *For if you were cut out of the natural wild olive tree, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree; how much more these being according to nature will be grafted into their own olive-tree?*

Romans 11:25-28 The Fullness Of The Nations / Gentiles

Romans 11:25-28 MKJV *For I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, lest you should be wise within yourselves; that blindness in part has happened to Israel, until the fullness of the nations has come in.*

(26) *And so all Israel shall be saved; as it is written, "There shall come out of Zion the Deliverer, and He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob. (27) For this is My covenant with them, when I have taken away their sins."*

(28) *Indeed as regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes. But as regards the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes.*

Matthew 24:14 ASV *And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come.*

Paul says that the salvation of Israel first requires the salvation of the nations (or Gentiles) and when that process, which we call the Great Commission is complete, then Israel will turn back to God “and then the end shall come”.

So the salvation of the Jews, and the end of this age, depend on the progress of the gospel – or rather the progress of the proclamation of the gospel. “The fullness of the nations” does not mean that all gentiles will be saved, but it does mean they will all have a meaningful chance to be saved and some from each group will believe. This is made clear by several verses in the Book of Revelation indicating that people from every ethnic group will a) be in heaven and b) will have the gospel proclaimed to them:

Revelation 5:9-10 HCSB *And they sang a new song: You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; because You were slaughtered, and You redeemed people for God by Your blood from every tribe and language and people and nation. (10) You made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they will reign on the earth.*

Revelation 7:9-10 HCSB *After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were robed in white with palm branches in their hands. (10) And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!*

Revelation 14:6-7 HCSB *Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, having the eternal gospel to announce to the inhabitants of the earth--to every nation, tribe, language, and people. (7) He spoke with a loud voice: "Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come. Worship the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water."*

This naturally leads to the question of “how far along in the process are we”. It was in 1945 Archbishop William Temple announced that “finally the Church is in every nation on earth”. Later in the 1970's it was realized that there were many “hidden people” inside each nation who had no church in their particular tribe and no gospel in their particular language. This has led to today's emphasis on “unreached people groups”. Estimates vary on how many groups exist without a vital, evangelizing church in their midst (from around 4,000 to 10,000). The Joshua Project now uses the term Least-Reached People Groups and says there are currently 6,505 of them. For some excellent information and statistics you can go to: <http://www.joshuaproject.net/globalstatistics.php>

It is interesting that it was right after Archbishop William Temple's proclamation in 1945 that momentum gathered for the existence of the State of Israel which was founded in 1948. I believe we are now in the overlap between the two (Present Gentile and Coming Jewish) eras, as the gospel finally reaches the last groups who have not heard and as Israel gains tenure and land and plans to rebuild its Temple one day. The fullness of the Gentiles is about to come in, and once this has happened Israel will experience revival and salvation.

But Israel will not gain its security without a colossal fight and the storm clouds are gathering as this weeks Holocaust-Denial conference in Iran and the statement of its controversial President that "Just as the Soviet Union was wiped out and today does not exist, so will the Zionist regime soon be wiped out," (see <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/meast/12/12/iran.holocaust.conference.reut/index.html>)

I believe that we are about to see the end of the Gentile era of gospel expansion and the beginning of a rise in Jewish Christianity (which is sometimes referred to as Messianic Judaism). The revival in Ezekiel 37 (Valley of Dry Bones) is followed by chapters 37 and 38 - the Gog and Magog invasion from lands that are Islamic today!

As a missionary I used to think it could take 20 to 120 years for the gospel to finally reach the least reached people groups, but with the Internet and amazing connectivity that is all beginning to change. Perhaps the rise of mass communication of the gospel since the end of WW2 – first with radio and then huge short-wave transmitters, and 8 Mm projectors - then with TV and video, Internet and DVD – is part of God's plan to get the gospel out to all nations in this last hour!

In the verses at the start of this study Paul describes the Jews as suffering a great spiritual blindness that made them “enemies of the gospel” and even to this day some Jews are vehemently anti-Christian and oppose even such innocent displays of the faith as Christmas trees and nativity scenes and some Jewish film directors have made some extremely anti-Christian references in their films.

We are not yet at the point where everyone has heard, nor are we anywhere near a mass conversion of Jews to Christ - but the times are a'changing and we are much closer now than we ever were.

Mercy can only be shown to someone who needs merc**Romans 11:28-36 HCSB** Regarding the gospel, they are enemies for your advantage, but regarding election, they are loved because of their forefathers, (29) since God's gracious gifts and calling are irrevocable. (30) As you once disobeyed God, but now have received mercy through their disobedience, (31) so they too have now disobeyed, resulting in mercy to you, so that they also now may receive mercy. (32) For God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that He may have mercy on all. (33) Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and untraceable His ways! (34) **For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?** (35) **Or who has ever first given to Him, and has to be repaid?** (36) For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.y, that is to sinners, to the disobedient, to the ungrateful and to the rebellious. So for God to be seen as merciful then there must be a “supply of sinners”! Because if there were no sinners, then there could be no mercy! So the Gentiles “once disobeyed God” but now have found mercy, and then it is the turn of the Jews – to disobey God – so God could be merciful to them as well! For God has imprisoned all in disobedience, so that He may have mercy on all.

Try and follow the twists and turns here. In an absolutely perfect world full of perfect people who always obeyed all the rules and were always financially prosperous and in good health and so on – in such a world, there would be no justice (because there would be no wrongs to correct), and no forgiveness (because there would be no sins to forgive) and no charity (because there would be no poor and needy to give to) and no sympathy or compassion (because everyone would be happy all the time and not ever need sympathy or compassion) and no uplifting or restoration (because no one would ever fall) and no homecoming for the Prodigal Son (because he would never stray to begin with) and no repentance (because there would be no sin) and no mercy (because there would be no sinners). Such a world would be extremely pleasant and well organized but it would be a moral and spiritual vacuum where no one would be challenged, doubt, struggle or grow.

Taking another angle, if the world was simply what the evolutionists say it is – a jungle, where “survival of the fittest” and good genetics sort out the species - then how can we explain the long-term survival of the weak and of the vulnerable and of the less than optimal? Only the grace of God! For many years I suffered from quite severe epilepsy and in a world of “survival of the fittest” I logically should have been weeded out and cast aside. Only the fact that God has put compassion and love and kindness and mercy in people's hearts – only these divine qualities, as part of the “image of God” in us, kept me from that fate.

Everywhere we look we see weakness and sin and pain and suffering. It seems illogical – but these things are testimony to a world in which mercy is abundant. If we could all survive alone, as rugged tough individuals, without the need of anyone else, making our own way, under our own steam, then there would be no need for love or for nurture or for teamwork or for marriage or for most forms of love apart from some temporary erotic passion.

Jesus said “the poor will always be with you” - the poor are always there to draw compassion, love and justice out of our hearts - just as Lazarus sat at the rich man's gate to test his character each day – and to call him to repentance from selfish luxury.

The imperfections in this world are put there for a reason – to draw out the perfections that are in our heart such as compassion, love, mercy, patience, forgiveness and kindness. Once we have learned these precious spiritual lessons - then we are ready to walk on the golden streets of Heaven – but not before. We will be ready for a world “in which righteousness dwells” once we have learned how to manage graciously in one where sin dwells.

So God has allowed everyone to fall into sin and disobedience, so that He might have mercy on all, and so each of us may learn what it is to be loved unconditionally. That is He wants us to learn what it is to be loved even after we have made a complete mess of things and we cry out “Lord. Remember me when you have come into Your Kingdom” as did the dying thief. God wants us to believe in His total mercy and in His complete unconditional love. So He allows us to make a mess of things so we can be forgiven and restored. He wants to show us that His love does NOT depend on our performance. And that is a lesson He wants both Jew and Gentile to learn together.

God remains true to us when we make a complete and utter and total botch of things: *Regarding the gospel, they are enemies for your advantage, but regarding election, they are loved because of their forefathers, since God's gracious gifts and calling are irrevocable.* No matter how big a mess the Jews may make of things God still loves them because His gracious gifts and calling are irrevocable.

God's love and God's calling on your life – whether it be your calling to salvation, to the ministry, and to the use of certain spiritual gifts are irrevocable (however your “office” and realm of responsibility may be greatly reduced if you fall into moral failure). God will persist in loving you even when you have given up on yourself!

2 Timothy 2:13 HCSB *if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.*

Now the aim of God is to build a new world based on unconditional love which is poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit. Now if we are to learn how to love our love must be tested – and that means the world needs to be imperfect for now. The trials and tests of love, in patient endurance and suffering and faith and hope and believing and in personal sacrifice and generosity and hard labor – these trials need a world that is “bound up in disobedience”, for only a world that has fallen into sin can be redeemed!

So God's logic is not our logic and His ways are not our ways. God has so ordered things so that after we have sinned and suffered we will end up being far better people than if we had never sinned and suffered at all. At the end of our sin we will know redemption, grace and mercy and at the end of our suffering we will know faith, love, hope and have a loving and perfected character (Romans 5:1-5). Now this is not to say “so let us sin that grace may increase” (Romans 6:1-11) for God has never meant us to continue in sin, but to move beyond it to holy love.

Paul is astonished at God's method of binding all up in disobedience so that He might have mercy on all and writes: *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable His judgments and untraceable His ways!* (34) **For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been His counselor?** (35) **Or who has ever first given to Him, and has to be repaid?**

This messed up, demon-indwelt, sin-wracked, suffering, fallen and battered world is part of God's plan, part of His unsearchable judgments and untraceable ways. This “present evil age” will come to an end at some point once certain lessons have been learned and evil put away forever and then a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells will take its place. Age after age will go on as God perfects His people and the lesson of this age is holy and redeeming love.

None of us knows the mind of the Lord, or can tell Him how to run the Universe better. It is His, and He will make something wonderful out of it – and out of us. Because after all it is “all His” - *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*

Romans 12:1,2

Personal Sanctification

Romans 12:1-2 MKJV *I beseech you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, pleasing to God, which is your reasonable service. (2) And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, in order to prove by you what is that good and pleasing and perfect will of God.*

Having journeyed through the long theological excursus of Romans 9-11 we now get back into practical Christian living and will stay there until the end of Romans. These two verses we will examine today are among the most preached on verses in Scripture and shine a clear and concise light on what is involved in personal sanctification (or holiness).

Paul starts with our bodies, and according to him they are not evil, but are redeemable, even acceptable on God's altar and can become “holy, pleasing to God” and part of our logical and reasonable service (Gk: *logiken latreian*) to our Creator. In 1 Corinthians 6 Paul says:

1 Corinthians 6:13 MKJV (13) *Meats for the belly and the belly for meats, but God shall destroy both it and them. But the body is not for fornication, but for the Lord; and the Lord is for the body.*

Notice that the body is “for the Lord” and the Lord is “for the body”. Our body is meant to be dedicated to God, and God means to indwell our bodies and sanctify them! How is God “for the body”? He loves it, indwells it, heals it, uses it for ministry and will raise it from the dead at the Last Trump! God has a big, huge plan for your body so you had better like it and had better dedicate it to Him in praise and worship and obedience.

How then do we become a “living sacrifice”. Sacrifice has two meanings in English but only one in Greek and Hebrew – which confuses things a bit. In Greek and Hebrew it means something offered on an altar, an act of worship, it can be grain, corn, a dove, a sheep, a bullock, a goat – and was worked out so that even the poorest person could afford it. Sacrifice in this sense means sacred offering (*sacra* – sacred). Later on the meaning of painful renunciation was added with the association of the slain sheep and perhaps Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. However in the Bible while sacrifices were supposed to cost something they were never supposed to be burdensome – so poor people were allowed to sacrifice a pigeon that cost less than a days wage (Leviticus 5:7, 12:8, 14:22, Matthew 10:29). The phrase used means “within reach of their hand” or “what they can easily afford”. So the notion of “sacrificial giving” as only being good “when it hurts” is not a thoroughly biblical concept.

So the basic idea of the sacrifice is that it is simply something completely given over to God. Your body should be completely given over to God but you may not have to live in a bark hut in the Amazon jungle to be truly consecrated! You simply have to be Christ's completely, right where you are.

Consecrating the body means consecrating what your hands do, where your feet take you, what your tongue says, what your eyes see and ears hear and how your body interacts with others - including of course your sexual and moral life.

But the body tends to follow the mind and its aspirations so Paul asks us to have renewed minds which are not squeezed into the world's mold. We are not to be conformed to lust, materialism, envy and selfish ambition. We are not to let our minds and thoughts dwell on pornography or violence or on crude and vulgar things.

The last week has seen a number of counseling incidents with “wrong financial thinking” as the main theme – gambling, risky stock market speculation, financial addictions, a woman leaving her godly husband over financial concerns and so on and so forth. The mind went after money, mind was conformed to this world – and the life catastrophically followed:

1 Timothy 6:9-10 MKJV *But they who will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts which plunge men into destruction and perdition. (10) For the love of money is a root of all evils, of which some having lusted after, they were seduced from the faith and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.*

The mind was divided into multiple parts by the Greek philosophers but two parts concern us – the phronema or “framework” of the mind (the worldview) and the nous or thoughts of the mind that fill the mental framework. As Christians we have the “mind of Christ” that is the phronema or mental framework and worldview of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). However we have to plug the right thoughts (nous) into the Christian mental framework. If we put the right thoughts into our minds then the mental framework is made stronger and more useful, however if we insist on pushing ugly, ungodly, misshapen thoughts into our minds our mental framework is twisted, distorted and weakened. Our thoughts need to be renewed, made clean and redeemed and as we do this we will discover the “good, acceptable and perfect will of God”.

So how do we renew our minds? Keep the garbage out, and put the good stuff in.

Keeping trash out: Don't view porn, don't listen to violent rap music, don't daydream about violent or sexual scenarios, don't read rubbish or enjoy tabloid gossip, avoid materialistic people and consuming too much advertising, avoid accepting wrong lifestyles as normal, don't indulge “Days Of Our Lives” fantasy existences, and don't let superstition, paranoia, fear, skepticism, unbelief and irrationality fill your mind!

Putting the good stuff in: Do study the Scriptures, get knowledge and wisdom wherever it can be found, read classic Christian authors and missionary biographies, listen to uplifting and Christian music, think logically and clearly, associate with people who are positively fully of faith and hope, go to lectures at a good bible college near you, listen to teaching on your CD player, think about world issues in a Christian context, cultivate boldness, and affirm your sexuality without caving in to it.

AS you do this your mind will straighten up and you will begin to clearly understand spiritual things and to see God's will for your life and His power to help you live it.

Romans 12:3

A Humble Mind Is A Sane Mind

Romans 12:3 MKJV *For I say, through the grace given to me, to every one who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think. But set your mind to be right-minded, even as God has dealt to every man the measure of faith.*

“Delusions of grandeur” are common among the insane, humility however seems reserved for those who have a solid grasp on life and on their place in the cosmos. Our natural human tendency is to imagine that we are much more important or more able than we really are. Some years ago at the age of 39 I decided that because I was OK at cycling when I was young I could get fit by training for a 55km road race. I did lose weight and I did get much fitter but I came dead last in the road race (I will spare you the details!). I was not what I thought I was – I did not have a “sober estimate of myself” .

Lacking a sober estimate of one's abilities and importance can have much worse consequences than losing a bicycle race. It can result in repeated failure in life, in humiliation and even in bankruptcy. Occasionally it can result in death – when an officer overestimates the strength of his troops or the wisdom of his strategy. In corporate life it results in stressed out staff and people scramble to “pick up the pieces” after someone senior promised but could not deliver.

Now that does not mean that very low self-esteem is a virtue. God does not ask us to think of ourselves as worms – but rather as children of God. Yet we are flawed and finite children of God. We have to face up to the fact that we are not all Billy Graham or Mother Teresa. We are a mixture of good and evil, and our abilities (even in the one person) range from brilliant to woeful. Someone may be a great evangelist and a hopeless administrator, or a wonderful bible teacher and hopeless pianist. And the sooner we come to terms with this – the better for all involved.

Many people want to be missionaries who are simply not gifted for living under tough conditions in foreign countries. That is no shame on them, only about 2% of people do have such a calling. Such people should breathe easy and pursue a calling that God has called them to and which He will bless them in. Others want to be bible teachers, when in fact they are very good evangelists – great at explaining the basics, but definitely not theologians. That is fine – just stick to their true calling as an evangelist and they will be blessed. Others are terrific administrators (one of the most needed giftings in the body and in shortest supply) but feel they should be “more spiritual” and insist on preaching and get hurt by the feedback. We all need a solid sense of ourselves – and of what we are, and what we are not – and the grace to accept that “we are who we are”.

The human potential movement has kept telling people that they can be “anything they like”. That is patent nonsense. I will never be a great cyclist no matter how hard I try. Lance Armstrong and a few thousand others will be way, way ahead of me! People want to be all sorts of things they are unsuited for - because of parental pressure or peer pressure or because it is cool or out of sheer vanity. Just look at some of the odd and peculiar folk that run as political candidates!

A few years after the humiliating cycle race God gave me an illustration about the fish in the sea. Some fish are sardines and are meant to be small, some are whales and are meant to be huge. A sardine the size of a whale would be out of place and a whale the size of a sardine would be similarly “wrong”. God made BOTH the whale and the sardine and loves both and intended both to simply be as they are. We do not require our cats to bark or fetch the newspaper – after all they are cats! But we are not so clever about ourselves. We feel guilty because we are not super-achievers in every field. We feel that we SHOULD be slim, trim, good looking, and able to run the four minute mile while doing Tensor Calculus.

Spiritual objectives can clash with career ambitions so that some folk want be both Ghandi and Donald Trump at the same time. We have to make choices and choose to focus on this or that, as Jesus said “You cannot server two masters,you cannot serve both God and Mammon.” And those important choices require a solid sense of personal reality.

Paul tells us that the solid sense of personal reality comes from our faith and from understanding the “measure of faith” that God has given to each of us. The word for measure is “metron” - which we find in words such as meter, metronome, metric etc. It means a graduated, measured out portion, an allotted amount. God gives each person a certain amount of faith for functioning in the body of Christ. In fact the very next verse starts a whole section on this:

Romans 12:4-8 MKJV *For even as we have many members in one body, and all members do not have the same function, (5) so we the many are one body in Christ, and each one members of one another. (6) Then having gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, if prophecy, according to the proportion of faith; (7) or ministry, in the ministry; or he who teaches, in the teaching; (8) or he who exhorts, in the encouragement; or he who shares, in simplicity; or he who takes the lead, in diligence; or he who shows mercy, in cheerfulness.*

So the measure of faith primarily relates to our ministry gifting (and not to saving faith). As saved Christians we have a kind of working measure of faith to believe God for some things and not for others. Some have faith for healing, others for prophecy, others to be able to win people to Christ, others have great faith in prayer and become intercessors, yet others have great faith in God's sovereign wisdom and become leaders and administrators. So our area of faith and our area of gifting go hand in hand.

So Paul is saying – check what you really have faith in God for before you think you have a gift in that area. Where is your spiritual heart beating? That is probably where God wants you to be. Where are you doubtful, skeptical or cynical – that is definitely NOT your ministry! Most of us find our working faith confined to a few main areas – and it is those areas we should develop in all godliness, wisdom and humility.

Romans 12:4-8

Spiritual Gifts

Romans 12:4-8 MKJV *For even as we have many members in one body, and all members do not have the same function, (5) so we the many are one body in Christ, and each one members of one another. (6) Then having gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, if prophecy, according to the proportion of faith; (7) or ministry, in the ministry; or he who teaches, in the teaching; (8) or he who exhorts, in the encouragement; or he who shares, in simplicity; or he who takes the lead, in diligence; or he who shows mercy, in cheerfulness.*

Here Paul gives the Romans a condensed version on 1 Corinthians 12 and portrays the Church as a complex organic body of highly differentiated believers who serve each other diligently and possess a humble attitude (having a sober estimate of themselves – see verse 3).

We are members of the body of Christ – and also members of each other. I am a typical cerebral bible teacher, my wife Minda is a very organized “helper” with the gift of mercy. Minda would give away everything to the poor. I would make sure they had right doctrine! Yet I need her gifts to keep me in the real world and she needs my teaching so that she stays close to God and does not get totally wrapped up in “tasks” that always need to be done. I always feel guilty that I am not helpful enough, but Minda always feels guilty that she does not do enough bible study! We are not the same – and that is a good thing!

What I have applied to Minda and I can be applied to Christians as a whole. We each have a different personality, gifts and area of responsibility. Some people are great at helping alcoholics, others serve God in universities while yet others are missionaries, evangelists, or pastors. Each of us has strengths and weaknesses, things we do well and things we continually feel guilty about. Many bible teachers are a bit “aloof” personally, many pastors are poor at handling conflict, many prophets are a bit tactless, many apostles are too driven and demanding. None of us has our act totally together so we all need each other and when all the colors of the gift rainbow are blended together a beautiful church results.

Paul tells us to stick to what we do best: *or ministry, in the ministry; or he who teaches, in the teaching; (8) or he who exhorts, in the encouragement;* - in other words enter fully into your gift and serve in that capacity fully and totally. It is often better to develop one gift deeply than to try and have “all the gifts”. Billy Graham perfected being an evangelist, John Stott perfected being a bible teacher – and so on and so forth. Do not try and win every race – just run your own race!

Now there are numerous (about 30 I think) different spiritual gifts listed in various places in Scripture – tongues, prophecy, pastoring, apostle, encouragement, healing, leadership, faith, miracles, teaching, sharing, showing mercy, discernment of spirits, interpretation of tongues, wisdom, knowledge, helps, administration, speaking, serving, hospitality, among others (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12-14, Ephesians 4, 1 Peter 4 among other references).

I sense that these are not in any way a complete list – the variegated grace of God as Peter calls it, can produce an infinite variety of spiritual callings – Sunday School teachers, workers with the disabled and so on. And some gifts seem to have numerous sub-categories 'apostle to the Gentiles', 'apostle to the circumcision' etc. Worship leaders are not even mentioned in the New Testament house church environment – but it is a gift that is well recognized today.

The idea is that God makes us mutually interdependent and gives us each a spiritual ability or calling that is our place, our niche, in the body of Christ. Some of these gifts are clearly supernatural – such as tongues, miracles and healing, while others are just the practical outworking of God's wisdom in our midst – wisdom, knowledge, teaching, administration, and leadership. Some churches emphasize the supernatural gifts and neglect the more “mundane” callings, while others do the reverse and are superbly administered but without the miraculous! However it is not a matter of either/or – but both/and.

if prophecy, according to the proportion of faith; - Our faith perception of God determines how we can “prophecy” - how we can hear Him and bring His words to others. We are not to prophecy “cool stuff” that we hear from others but according to our own faith, and our own individual understanding of God in the Spirit. We are simply to say what we ourselves see, and our spiritual “sight” depends on our faith.

or he who shares, in simplicity; or he who takes the lead, in diligence; or he who shows mercy, in cheerfulness. Some gifts require special precautions – the donor must do so simply and transparently without ostentatious “trumpet-blowing”, the leader must knuckle down to the task diligently doing all that is required and not skipping out from under the unpleasant administrative tasks, and the person who shows mercy must not get all upset at things or moan about their lack of appreciation by those helped.

Sometimes we want the whole world to be like us – missionaries want everyone to go to the mission field, evangelists want everyone to share their faith, bible teachers want everyone doing deep bible study for hours on end, intercessors insist we fast and pray and pastors want everyone in a dozen church activities. This can be innocent enthusiasm but it can also be dangerous if we get angry and frustrated that everyone is not lining up with how we see things. I knew a wonderful lady who had a gift of mercy and

encouragement who felt bad because she was not an evangelist. That is not the way we should feel! We ALL work together to lead people to Christ and her winning ways led many to like the church – and the pastor who was a great evangelist reaped the harvest.

Lets just “be what God has made us to be” and not question His goodness and wisdom in the matter but set out to perfect those gifts that He has given to us and to use them for His glory and for the upbuilding of His Church.

Romans 12:9-13 **Christian Actions In Community**

Romans 12:9-13 HCSB *Love must be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good. (10) Show family affection to one another with brotherly love. Outdo one another in showing honor. (11) Do not lack diligence; be fervent in spirit; serve the Lord. (12) Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer. (13) Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality.*

Romans 12:9-13 ISV *Your love must be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. (10) Be devoted to each other with mutual affection. Excel in showing respect for each other. (11) Never be lazy in showing such devotion. Be on fire with the Spirit. Serve the Lord. (12) Be joyful in hope, patient in trouble, and persistent in prayer. (13) Supply the needs of the saints. Extend hospitality to strangers.*

(Paul's cascade of Greek participles and adjectives is a bit difficult to translate so I have put two slightly different translations above.)

The key concept here is community: “one another”, “each other”, “the saints” - all these commands are about how Christians are to treat each other with love, honor and hospitality.

Let's stand back and ask “what was Paul obviously assuming as he wrote this”? He is clearly assuming that the Romans will be like a loving family! He assumes that all Christians will love each other, share with each other, know each other, care for each other, and honor each other just as a loving family would.

The Holy Spirit in their midst would distribute gifts (see verses 3-8) that would produce a loving and caring community. Spiritual gifts are not just given so that individual Christians can “have a ministry” or “fulfill their destiny”, rather they are given so that Christ may dwell among His people in community (Ephesians 4:11-16).

You CANNOT be an obedient holy biblical Christian on your own – living an isolated life, refusing Christian fellowship – because so MANY of the commands in the NT involve the word “one another”! The Great Command is “love your neighbor as yourself”, and the New Commandment is “love one another as I have loved you” and both commandments assume that we get involved with other people!

There is an intense zeal in what Paul is asking here “be on fire with the Spirit” (literally be boiling over with Spirit) a literal translation of verse 11 would be “in speed, not tardy, boiling over with the Spirit to serve the Lord as a slave”. Zoom, zoom, zoom into the things of God! Paul is asking for a high speed, high energy, high effort faith!

This sounds exhausting but it is not so hard because in community “what goes around comes around” and you receive back three times as much! As you give love, you receive love. It is not one spiritual expert burning out trying to serve everyone but a whole community encouraging each other onward.

But communities have their tough times and the Roman Christians were severely persecuted. In Romans 8 Paul even goes so far as to say “we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered all day long”.

Romans 8:35-39 HCSB *Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can affliction or anguish or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? (36) As it is written: **Because of You we are being put to death all day long; we are counted as sheep to be slaughtered.** (37) No, in all these things we are more than victorious through Him who loved us. (38) For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, (39) nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will have the power to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord!*

So Paul issues the following commands for tough times: (12) *Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; be persistent in prayer.* (13) *Share with the saints in their needs; pursue hospitality.*

We are to have an inner strength from the Holy Spirit that allows us to rejoice in hope knowing God will work things out – and to wait patiently and prayerfully for the outcome. Meanwhile we are to help our fellow sufferers by sharing our money and goods with those in need and by actively pursuing hospitality. Open wallets and open homes were to characterize the Roman Christians!

But why should we bother? Because we are part of a spiritual family: *Show family affection to one another with brotherly love. Outdo one another in showing honor.*

And we are not to “fake it” like the insincere Christians who wear masks: *Love must be without hypocrisy.* (v9) (Hypocrite literally means “actor” or “mask wearer”). Love is not an “act” - it is a lifestyle! Christians were to be “real”, true to each other, solid supports in tough times and not flaky folk who are “all personality but have no character”.

The issue of character is reflected in Paul's desire for believers to have a clear moral stance: *Detest evil; cling to what is good.* (v.9) Paul tells them to “detest evil” - to hate and repudiate it. The Greek word here “apostugountes” means “to hate violently, abhor, loathe”. The spiritual person has moral clarity and utterly detests wickedness in all its forms.

The spiritual person also “clings to what is good” - there is a sticking with what is right and noble and good, even if hard or difficult. They take a high moral position and hold it. The Christian community is entirely dedicated to pursuing a high and holy Christian ideal!

Christian community is to be an energetic spiritual obeying of Christ in love, with great mutual care and concern and with very clear moral boundaries.

What if your church is not like this? What if it is cold, stingy and self-absorbed? What if it is utterly lonely or even worse has no clear moral boundaries? Then you need to pray for it, fervently pray for it to change! God loves those folk – but wants so much more for them! Christian obedience is much more than prayer, bible reading and tithing – it is Christian love lived out in real and practical ways in the power of the Holy Spirit!

Romans 12:14-21 HCSB Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. (15) Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. (16) Be in agreement with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation. (17) Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Try to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes. (18) If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone. (19) Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for His wrath. For it is written: **Vengeance belongs to Me; I will repay**, says the Lord. (20) **But if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.** (21) Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.

In our incredibly militarized world of instant threats and massive retaliation the command “do not repay anyone evil for evil” seems quaint, out-of-touch and very unrealistic. Perhaps these commands were only meant for the Christian community, or for personal matters – not national self-defense. But if someone is about to kill your family what will you do? The Bible does not repudiate legitimate self-defense or even capital punishment, but it does create a spirit of grace that minimizes their use:

Luke 22:35-38 HCSB He also said to them, "When I sent you out without money-bag, traveling bag, or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Not a thing," they said. (36) Then He said to them, "But now, whoever has a money-bag should take it, and also a traveling bag. And whoever doesn't have a sword should sell his robe and buy one. (37) For I tell you, what is written must be fulfilled in Me: **And He was counted among the outlaws.** Yes, what is written about Me is coming to its fulfillment." (38) "Lord," they said, "look, here are two swords." "Enough of that!" He told them.

Jesus a) clearly tells the disciples to defend themselves from danger as a real priority and even allows them to use lethal weapons (swords) but b) is clearly unenthusiastic about any use of violence and wants all talk of it to be minimized. Similarly in Romans 13 Paul allows the state to exercise capital punishment but is not an enthusiastic advocate of it.

The main meaning of Romans 12:14-21 is personal conflict and personal evil. I see it applying generally to squabbles, arguments, envy, loss of prestige, neighborhood disputes, parking disputes, financial matters, broken courtships and the persecutions, betrayals and disappointments of life. When we deal with a big corporation and feel shoddily treated -how do we react? When someone puts us down publicly – what do we think of doing in return? If someone despises us for being a believer – how do we respond?

The first principle is that of “reacting in the opposite spirit” this sees evil and spiritual, and trying to reproduce itself in people. So if someone is mean to you, and you become bitter and mean back then evil has conquered another human heart and multiplied itself. A second “mean spirit” has been generated. That is why Paul says: *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*

By blessing instead of cursing we are reacting in the opposite spirit and not allowing evil to dominate us, live within us, and reproduce its evil ways in the world. Rather we are attempting to “overcome evil with good”. In the process we also become less reactive and more masterful and strong.

Acting in the opposite spirit also has an impact in the spiritual realm: *But if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.* The “fiery coals” may be the feeling of shame that comes to the perpetrator, or the judgment that comes from God. Either way, the one who acts in the opposite spirit comes out the winner spiritually.

The next principle is the “the emotional unity of the saints”. We can best withstand persecution and evil if we are one united body, held together with strong bonds of love. Just as one twig is easily broken but a bundle of sticks is hard to break, so Christian unity gives us the power to resist evil. This unity was to be built through deep emotional congruence – a truly empathetic and understanding Christian community: *Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.* Christians were to enter into each others emotional worlds, in trust and empathy, rejoicing with those who rejoiced and weeping with those who wept. This sense of being heard, understood and loved kept everyone together.

The third reaction to persecution was to avoid the natural tendency to division that comes when people of different classes and abilities mix together - disagreement, pride, social snobbishness, and intellectual elitism. Such common causes of division were not to be present among God's people. Instead the rich were to hang out with the poor and all were to realize that God alone is the source of all wisdom. *Be in agreement with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation.*

Fourthly Christians were to be noble, honorable, large-hearted and above petty disputes: *Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Try to do what is honorable in everyone's eyes.* The honorable person is not a mud-slinger. The recent rancorous dispute involving two media personalities with large egos is not a Christian way to behave! It has diminished everyone involved in it. She said X, so I'll say Y... is immaturity in action. The noble, mature Christian shows restraint and does not retaliate when provoked. We all have a “hot button” that can flip, and a tendency to want to return evil for evil as a matter of “justice”. Spirit-filled Christians try to keep that “hot button” under control and to keep the feeling of power through anger to a minimum.

Fifthly Christians are to be pre-disposed towards peace rather than conflict. (18) *If possible, on your part, live at peace with everyone.* Sometimes peace is not possible because the other person is either irreconcilable, hostile and implacable, or in some cases is even dangerous to deal with (e.g. a violent abuser). But where peace is possible, we should seek it.

Let me quickly add that seeking peace does not mean that you give up a valid right to protect yourself from harm, nor does it mean that you should stay in a violent and abusive situation. The most peaceful thing to do may be to move to a safe location while the problem is being resolved.

Finally the Spirit-filled Christian is to show restraint so that God will have room to act: (19) *Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for His wrath. For it is written: **Vengeance belongs to Me; I will repay,** says the Lord. (20) **But If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.** (21) *Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.**

God will repay, in this way or that, and when the time is most fitting. Dictators eventually fall, the proud get humbled, the liar gets found out, and so on. It is not up to us to decide to take revenge. Christianity has stumbled most and done its worst when a group of Christians has decided to take revenge against another group of Christians. These public internal wars between preachers denominations, theologies and so forth have done more to hurt the faith than almost anything else. Go to prayer before you go to war with a brother! Calm down, back off, and let God be the judge! Protect your heart from violent anger, hatred, bitterness and revenge. Do not be conquered by evil, keep a pure and good heart – and overcome evil with good!

There are some times when evil cannot be ignored – for instance we cannot let a child molester work his way through a church youth group! There is indeed a time for strict church discipline and even a time to call the police. Some evils have to be restrained through appropriate legal means. However we should not rush into such things with an angry and violent spirit. We should do so calmly and wisely, seeing them as the

best available option at the time.

Romans 13:1-7

Submitting to Governments

Romans 13:1-7 HCSB Everyone must submit to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist are instituted by God. (2) So then, the one who resists the authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves. (3) For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do good and you will have its approval. (4) For government is God's servant to you for good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, because it does not carry the sword for no reason. For government is God's servant, an avenger that brings wrath on the one who does wrong. (5) Therefore, you must submit, not only because of wrath, but also because of your conscience. (6) And for this reason you pay taxes, since the authorities are God's public servants, continually attending to these tasks. (7) Pay your obligations to everyone: taxes to those you owe taxes, tolls to those you owe tolls, respect to those you owe respect, and honor to those you owe honor.

Submission to governing authorities is not as simple as Romans 13 makes it sound. For instance - should Christians have submitted to Stalin, Hitler, Idi Amin or Pol Pot? Should Moses have submitted to Pharaoh and should Elijah have submitted to Jezebel? Romans 13 is the “default” position for Christians in relationship to a normal functional secular government. But Scripture also paints a picture of other kinds of government and how the people of God responded to them! There are seven basic Church-State postures that we see in Scripture. To make it easy I have started them all with the letter R.

- 1. Rapport** – when there is orderly and godly government - Nathan, Priests & David and Solomon
- 2. Respect** - when there is orderly pagan government - Daniel & Nebacudnezzar, Darius
- 3. Rebuke** - when there is significant systemic sin - the prophets relationship with most of the Kings of Judah
- 4. Rejection / Keeping One's Distance** - When there is despicable , dangerous, disorderly and profane government - Daniel & Belteshazzar, Jesus and Herod.
- 5. Resistance/Civil disobedience** - When there is a clearly Anti-Christian authority - Peter and the Sanhedrin.
- 6. Reformation/Restoration** - When there is an idolatrous government - Ahab, Jezebel vs Elijah, Elisha & Jehu. OT reform movements.
- 7. Revolution/War** - When there is a very oppressive and evil government - Moses & Pharaoh, Maccabees & Antiochus Epiphanes.

These responses were so common a part of the Jewish heritage that they were widely known as being rather difficult to govern! Paul is not repudiating the stances of Moses, Elijah or Nathan but is rather ensuring that Christians do not think that belonging to the kingdom of God gives them the right to be a poor citizen of the kingdoms of this world. Paul is advocating a kind of dual citizenship – a citizenship in Heaven and a citizenship on Earth, with the heavenly citizenship of course taking priority. Christian faith is no excuse for tax evasion!

Thus Romans 13 must be taken in the light of the whole of Scripture and of common sense. If you decide that because you are a son of God and a “child of the King” that you need not pay taxes, obey the speed limit, or obey airport restrictions on carrying weapons on planes – you will get yourself in a lot of trouble and that trouble, in some way will be an expression of God's judgment: *So then, the one who resists the*

authority is opposing God's command, and those who oppose it will bring judgment on themselves.

Paul makes clear Who is boss – governments are “God's servants to do good” and they must serve Christ or perish (Psalm 2). Indeed eventually all non-submitting governments will be utterly abolished:

Daniel 2:44-45 MKJV *And in the days of these kings, the God of Heaven shall set up a kingdom which shall never be destroyed. And the kingdom shall not be left to other peoples, but it shall crush and destroy all these kingdoms, and it shall stand forever. (45) Because you saw that the stone was cut out of the mountain without hands, and that it crushes the iron, the bronze, the clay, the silver, and the gold, the great God has made known to the king what shall occur after this. And the dream is certain, and its meaning is sure.*

Revelation 11:15 MKJV *And the seventh angel sounded. And there were great voices in Heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of His Christ. And He will reign forever and ever.*

It is interesting that on one hand Scripture says that authority is ordained by God (Romans 13:1) and on the other hand that it is ordained by Satan!

Luke 4:5-8 MKJV *And the Devil, leading Him up into a high mountain, showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. (6) And the Devil said to Him, All this power I will give you, and the glory of them; for it has been delivered to me. **And I give it to whomever I will.** (7) Therefore if you will worship me, all shall be yours. (8) And Jesus answered and said to him, Get behind me, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only shall you serve."*

1 John 5:19 HCSB *We know that we are of God, and **the whole world is under the sway of the evil one.***

Which is correct? Paul's version, Luke's version or that of the apostle John? There are many accounts of people gaining political power through doing deals with the Devil. Most notably a revolutionary in Haiti who went to the forest and sacrificed a pig and promised the nation to the Devil for 100 years if he would be successful in his slave revolution – and indeed that happened! There indeed seems to be places (often with long occult histories) where the Devil seems to appoint the dictatorial and terrible leadership (which is part of the reason why we should pray for our leaders 1 Timothy 2:1-4).

The theological doctrine of the “divine right of Kings” which lasted all through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period – though even Thomas Aquinas disagreed with it (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Divine_right_of_kings) was largely based on Romans 13:1 – that all authority is of God's creation. Many historians think that Paul was writing just before the outbreak of serious Roman persecution and was advising the Christians to “keep their nose clean” when living in the city that was the center of Imperial power.

Nevertheless Christians should be “law-abiding” and not rebellious or fractious. At times a “higher law” must be obeyed – such as hiding Jews from the Nazis or keeping Islamic converts to Christianity safe in Saudi Arabia. Indeed in Saudi Arabia, no Christian worship, not even a home bible study, is allowed on pain of death. In such a case there is a clear choice between God and government to be made!

North Korea has made the “Dear Leader” to be God and their secret agents will kill anyone trying to convert North Koreans to Christ. It is the only country in the world that goes that far. North Korea used to be the Vatican of the East it had so many churches, now Christianity has been all but wiped out! Again we see a clear tension between God and government and the list of such examples is very long indeed. So what is Paul trying to say here? Under “normal circumstances” government is instituted by God to bring

civil order and to punish wrongdoing as a servant of God - so it deserves respect, honor and taxes. Government is powerful and “not to be trifled with” for “it does not bear the sword in vain”. The Roman Christians were to be good citizens and stay out of trouble and not attempt any religiously motivated revolutions against Caesar. That was good advice in the context of the day – and for many Christians today it still applies, but one day a wicked government will rule over the whole earth (Romans 13) and we are not to submit to its demands to renounce Christ or to take the “mark of the Beast”.

Revelation 14:9-11 HCSB (9) *And a third angel followed them and spoke with a loud voice: "If anyone worships the beast and his image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, (10) he will also drink the wine of God's wrath, which is mixed full strength in the cup of His anger. He will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the sight of the holy angels and in the sight of the Lamb, (11) and the smoke of their torment will go up forever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and his image, or anyone who receives the mark of his name.*

Romans 13:8-10

The Debt of Love

Romans 13:8-10 HCSB *Do not owe anyone anything, except to love one another, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. (9) The commandments: **You shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet,** and if there is any other commandment--all are summed up by this: **You shall love your neighbor as yourself.** (10) Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.*

Love is the only debt a Christian should have. All other debt is bondage:

Proverbs 22:7 HCSB *The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is a slave to the lender.*

But the “debt to love” brings inner freedom! It is easy to see that I owe a continuous 'debt of love' to my excellent wife Minda, after all she loves me in return! Every day I am to “pay' my debt by loving her – and there is nothing terribly hard or onerous about that.

However it gets tougher when we have a 'debt of love' to other Christians, or to difficult relatives or even to a neighbor who litters the footpath with trash. In fact we are to 'love one another' - especially in the Christian community, as if we 'owed them' love. Love is not an “extra” - it is an obligation. And our soul grows and is sanctified as we undertake this obligation.

Now when we think of obligation we think of the Law, of commandments and of rules and ceremonies that we must keep. Paul tells us that all such legal and ceremonial obligations have, spiritually speaking, being replaced by this duty to love one another.

All the commandments are summed up in one “You shall love your neighbor and yourself”, all the ritual requirements, all the things we “must do” under the Law – are fulfilled by Christian love. Love is the complete spiritual fulfillment of the Law. This is so, Paul tells us because “love does no wrong to a neighbor”. Love is harm-less, therefore love never breaks the Law.

This enables Christian ethics to be boiled down to the single consideration “am I loving my neighbor or am I harming my neighbor?” Abortion (except when the mother's life is in danger) is clearly “harming” the neighbor (the unborn child) and can harm the mother as well. Lying, theft, murder, rape, swindling, treachery – these all harm one's neighbor and are violations of love. On a larger level destroying the environment so that one's neighbor lives in a polluted and unsafe world is also an act against love. Pouring dioxane into a river so people get cancer may be legal in some very poor nations, but it is not Christian love.

Is it Christian love to provide good medical attention to the rich while the uninsured poor often die from easily preventable causes? Is such a system “loving” or is it doing great harm to many people? Christians in such a system must work to find a way for the poor to be served with adequate and affordable medical help.

The parable of the Good Samaritan, which is the way Jesus defined 'loving one's neighbor as yourself' – tells us that ignoring pain is not appropriate (that is what the priest and the Levite did). The loving person acts and acts in practical and compassionate ways:

Luke 10:29-37 HCSB *But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" (30) Jesus took up the question and said: "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him, beat him up, and fled, leaving him half dead. (31) A priest happened to be going down that road. When he saw him, he passed by on the other side. (32) In the same way, a Levite, when he arrived at the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. (33) But a Samaritan on his journey came up to him, and when he saw the man, he had compassion. (34) He went over to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. (35) The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, 'Take care of him. When I come back I'll reimburse you for whatever extra you spend.'* (36) *"Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?" (37) "The one who showed mercy to him," he said. Then Jesus told him, "Go and do the same."*

We can harm our neighbor by 'leaving him for dead' – the simple act of walking by on the other side as he bleeds out is an act of harm in and of itself. Mercy, compassion, and practical help are part and parcel of the loving Christian life. Love is more than smiles and hugs – it is a muscular, active thing that sees needs and does good.

For instance I have found that if my wife is busy doing housework and I give her a hug, then go and switch on the TV and ignore her need for help – then my wife perceives me as being “unhelpful” and selfish and sees the hug as just a “con”, a way of getting out of work. On the other hand if I hug her and then ask “how can I help” then the hug is seen as a genuine act of love because I am willing to meet her need for help instead of just thinking of myself. Similarly the smiles and hugs and Christian greetings at church need to be also backed up by the practical meeting of felt needs.

James 2:15-16 HCSB *If a brother or sister is without clothes and lacks daily food, (16) and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, keep warm, and eat well," but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it?*

1 John 3:16-17 HCSB *This is how we have come to know love: He laid down His life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers. (17) If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need but shuts off his compassion from him--how can God's love reside in him?*

Places like Africa are a vast challenge to our Christian love and compassion. But so is the lonely widow, the friendless school student, the old woman with dementia, and the newcomer at church. We need to see all the people that the Lord brings into our life as

folk for whom Christ died and who He wants us to love. We “owe it” to the woman with dementia to be kind and patient with her and to genuinely ask how she is. We “owe it” to the lonely kid at school to help him to fit in. We “owe it” to the newcomer at church to greet them, and to ask them to lunch.

One last thing – do not expect people to ask for help! The wounded man had an obvious need and did not need to ask for help, indeed he may even have been unconscious. But the Good Samaritan saw the need and took the initiative. Take the initiative to ask someone “would you like a drink”, “have you eaten”, “would you like lunch” and so on.

Romans 13:11-14 **Christians Are Not Party Animals**

Romans 13:11-14 MKJV *This also, knowing the time, that it is already time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we believed. (12) The night is far spent, the day is at hand; therefore let us cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light. (13) Let us walk becomingly, as in the day; not in carousings and drinking; not in co-habitation and lustful acts; not in strife and envy. (14) But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not take thought beforehand for the lusts of the flesh.*

St. Augustine was converted to Christ through the above passage of Scripture the following account is from the website http://www.midwestaugustinians.org/saints/s_augconversion.html :

Augustine's life as a young man was characterized by loose living and a search for answers to life's basic questions.

He would follow various philosophers, only to become disillusioned with their teachings. For nine years he was associated with the Manichean sect. But he gradually became aware that Manicheism was unable to provide satisfactory answers to his probing questions.

At this time, Augustine was teaching rhetoric in Milan. He went to hear the preaching of Saint Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. At first he went only to hear Ambrose's eloquent style of speaking. But the Bishop's preaching led Augustine to a new understanding of the Bible and the Christian Faith.

Some time in the year 386, Augustine, his mother Monica, his son Adeodatus, and several friends, were spending time in Cassiciacum, a small village near Milan. While outdoors, Augustine heard the voice of a child singing a song, the words of which were, "Pick it up and read it. Pick it up and read it." He thought at first that the song was related to some kind of children's game, but could not remember ever having heard such a song before.

Then, realizing that this song might be a command from God to open and read the Scriptures, he located a Bible, picked it up, opened it and read the first passage he saw. It was from the Letter of Paul to the Romans. Augustine read:

*Not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual excess and lust, not in quarreling and jealousy.
Rather, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the desires of the flesh. --Romans
13: 13-14*

Reading this scripture, Augustine felt as if his heart were flooded with light. He turned totally from his life of sin. He was Baptized by Ambrose during the Easter Vigil April 24, 387. His friend Alypius and his son Adeodatus were Baptized at the same time.

Later, reflecting on this experience, Augustine wrote his famous prayer: *You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.* He went on to become a powerful influence on the spirituality and theology of the Christian Church.

Christians are not to be “party animals” - the recent drunken carousing and self-exposure of certain Hollywood celebrities and the popularity of “Girls Gone Wild” is symptomatic of the rapid moral decline of some (rather large) sub-sections of Western culture. But Christians are not to be like that! Rather we are to “put on the armor of light” and to live decent, holy and becoming lives - lives suited to the folk in whom Christ dwells.

The gaudy, lustful, indecent, squabbling, envious and foolish life of the flesh is on display all around us here in California. Slanging matches, hateful feuds, and atrocious and immoral behavior are the stuff of gossip, legend and press attention. People are being given the lowest possible moral examples by the media!

The Holy Spirit does not call us to live in the gutter – but in the Kingdom of God! We are to live with decency and dignity, we are to be a noble, wise and spiritual people, and we are to be awake and alert to the voice of God.

We are not to even think of such a lifestyle or to plan for it. “Make no provision for the lusts of the flesh”. Not planning on sinning means some quite obvious things - Don't go to that wild convention in Los Vegas, don't carry a condom “just in case” you meet someone attractive, don't think of how to meet that person that God does not want you involved with, don't think of joining the drunken crowd, don't hang out near the home of the immoral woman etc. We are not to supply sin with a method of gratification!

Paul uses many metaphors that describe a rapid growth in spiritual awareness: knowing the time, awake, cast off (darkness), put on (the armor of light, Jesus Christ). These are sudden things, that are done in a moment. For instance Augustine “woke up” and put off the darkness, and was flooded with light in the short time it takes to read a verse of Scripture. We are to stop molycoddling our lusts and instead we should make a sudden and definite break with them.

Paul gives a most unusual command – *But put on the Lord Jesus Christ!* What on earth does that mean? How do you put on a person? You act like that person, you walk and talk and think like that person, you become “in character” with that person even adopting their every thought, gesture and mood. We are to be “imitators of Christ” and to take His commandments (for example in the Sermon On The Mount) with absolute seriousness.

As we put on Christ we will find that we live an enlightened life and a spiritually safe life for we will also have “put on the armor of light”. We are to step out of the darkness and move into a new zone of living that is righteous, pure and good. The light is positive, pure, holy and clean. And as we dwell in it we are cleansed, healed and purified. The light will at first make us very aware of our sins – but only so they can be forgiven and removed:

1 John 1:5-10 HCSB Now this is the message we have heard from Him and declare to you: God is light, and there is absolutely no darkness in Him. (6) If we say, "We have fellowship with Him," and walk in darkness, we are lying and are not practicing the truth. (7) But if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (8) If we say, "We have no sin," we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. (9) If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (10) If we say, "We have not sinned," we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

In Ephesians 5 Paul has an extensive passage on what it means to live in the light:

Ephesians 5:8-20 HCSB For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light-- (9) for the fruit of the light results in all goodness, righteousness, and truth-- (10) discerning what is pleasing to the Lord. (11) Don't participate in the fruitless works of darkness, but instead, expose them. (12) For it is shameful even to mention what is done by them in secret. (13) Everything exposed by the light is made clear, (14) for what makes everything clear is light. Therefore it is said: Get up, sleeper, and rise up from the dead, and the Messiah will shine on you. (15) Pay careful attention, then, to how you walk--not as unwise people but as wise-- (16) making the most of the time, because the days are evil. (17) So don't be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. (18) And don't get drunk with wine, which leads to reckless actions, but be filled with the Spirit: (19) speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music to the Lord in your heart, (20) giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Living in the light is a joyous, Spirit-filled life of goodness, righteousness and truth. We live awake, sober and alert lives, discerning the will of the Lord and refusing the works of darkness, making the most of every day for God. The wild party lifestyle belongs to pre-conversion days, for Christians are not party animals, rather they are the children of God.

Romans 14:1-4

Doubtful Issues

Romans 14:1-4 HCSB Accept anyone who is weak in faith, but don't argue about doubtful issues. (2) One person believes he may eat anything, but one who is weak eats only vegetables. (3) One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat; and one who does not eat must not criticize one who does, because God has accepted him. (4) Who are you to criticize another's household slave? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And stand he will! For the Lord is able to make him stand.

The point of chapter 14 is “but don't argue about doubtful issues” and we need to keep that in mind as we look at this chapter! It is fundamentally an appeal for unity between the “strong in faith” and the “weak in faith” which we shall define shortly.

The strong in faith were not worried about “small stuff” and felt fine about eating meat and did not ask questions about where it came from or whether it had been sacrificed to heathen gods (idols). They just ate the food and gave glory to God.

The weak in faith suffered from what the ancient divines termed the “sin of particularity” - that is they were preoccupied with minor ethical quibbles. These folk are still around today and get concerned about the color of lipstick, the names of certain bible versions and the root derivation of common words. They probably also would never decorate a Christmas tree because of its “pagan origins”. Paul calls these folk “weak in faith” because of their inordinate fear of moral impurity and spiritual contamination.

The “strong in faith” however were given to scoffing at the fears of their brethren and hurt their feelings. They were unloving, cruel and disdainful of the sensitivities of their brothers and sisters in the faith! So on one hand we have quibbling and on the other hand we have insensitivity – and both are wrong!

Now we need to remember that issues of food and drink were “hot potatoes” that arose time and time again. The strict Jewish Christians would not eat pork and tended to keep the Jewish food laws, the Gentiles however were concerned about the dedication of the animals to idols (much as Halal meat today is slaughtered facing Mecca). They saw this as making the food spiritually suspect and preferred to eat vegetables rather than eat meat slaughtered in such a pagan fashion.

Later on Paul tells the Corinthians that meat that is actually within the bounds of an idol's temple is taboo. You don't go into the temple of Diana just to eat barbecue! However if you are outside of the temple precincts – just eat the meat without asking any questions (1 Corinthians 10:14-33).

This is still an issue for Asian students with “family shrines” in the kitchen where food is often dedicated to the spirits of the ancestors or to Buddha. If one of the family members is a Christian how should he or she handle it. Generally they just ask for their food to be put aside and not dedicated – but it can be a very delicate issue.

The thing is that the varying spiritual approaches can cause divisions between people. Paul simply says “you are BOTH right!”. The people who do not eat the food are right for following their conscience and the people who go ahead are right because their faith tells them that “idols are nothing” and enables them to be bold! Both sides are serving God – just in slightly different ways:

One who eats must not look down on one who does not eat; and one who does not eat must not criticize one who does, because God has accepted him. (4) Who are you to criticize another's household slave? Before his own Lord he stands or falls. And stand he will! For the Lord is able to make him stand.

God has accepted BOTH sets of people. The weak in faith will be “made to stand” by God, and the strong in faith is still accepted by God even though he eats (v.3). If we are saved, then we are accepted by God because of the work of Christ on the cross. Every single born-again Christian is acceptable to God! For the blood of Jesus Christ has made us acceptable! Therefore we are never to see another believer as “unacceptable” or to reject them for having a different practice or opinion on a minor matter.

Romans 15:7 ISV *Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ accepted you, for the glory of God.*

To put it another way: The people who do not put up a Christmas tree because it was an ancient pagan practice are acceptable to God, and so are those who do put up a Christmas tree in faith as a commemoration of Christ are acceptable to God. Both serve God in their own way.

Paul wants us to stop arguing about such things and to just love one another even though we have differences in the way that we interpret our faith. Unity is more important than uniformity. We are allowed diversity in personal faith practice on “minor matters”. As someone (I think Augustine) has said: “In the essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.”

I drive a rather large car, and some Christians accuse me of contributing to global warming. But I see it as being between me and God – and He is my Master and not them (v. 4) Yet I should respect them and give them the liberty to have their views. And they should leave me alone for I am not to be “judged by another man's conscience” (1 Corinthians 10:29).

We have to learn to live with each other. Christians have very different political views, environmental views, approaches to Christian music and to festivals and church practices and to matters of food and drink. In all these matters Paul tells us that love is the number one priority and that both sides are fine with God and that arguing about who is “right” and who is “wrong” is divisive and does far more harm than good.

Romans 14:5-8 HCSB *One person considers one day to be above another day. Someone else considers every day to be the same. Each one must be fully convinced in his own mind. (6) Whoever observes the day, observes it to the Lord. Whoever eats, eats to the Lord, since he gives thanks to God; and whoever does not eat, it is to the Lord that he does not eat, yet he thanks God. (7) For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. (8) If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.*

In verse 5 Paul tackles the question of the Sabbath:

One person considers one day to be above another day. Someone else considers every day to be the same. Each one must be fully convinced in his own mind.

According to Paul the Sunday Sabbath, Saturday Sabbath and non-Sabbath folk are all equally correct – as long as they hold their view “as unto the Lord”. The fact that they are living for God is the main thing – and this makes each differing view correct!

This is hard for us Westerners with our “if A is right then B must be wrong” view of reality, to grasp. That three different views of the same thing can be equally acceptable to God seems puzzling. Perhaps there is small truth, middle truth and big truth.

Small truth is something like “it is better to open a boiled egg at the pointy end”. In Jonathan Swift's work “Gulliver's Travels” the inhabitants of Lilliput were always at war between the Big-Endians and the Little Endians – those who opened their boiled eggs at the big end, and those who opened their boiled eggs at the little end! The furious debates between Mac users and PC users fit in this category for me – as do disputes over hymn books, where the organ should be placed in the church and the minor legalisms in church life.

Middle truth would be what we learn at school - the facts of geometry and chemistry and history. Important and worth debating, but not worth physically fighting over. Debates over eschatology or exegetical interpretations of Scripture would fit here.

Big truth is the “stuff worth dying for” - love, justice, mercy, compassion, conscience, human dignity, salvation, freedom, loyalty to Christ and the glory of God.

Thus if someone is demonstrating their loyalty to Christ by worshiping on Saturday, Sunday or even Wednesday – then leave them alone! They are serving God with their conscience and that is a good and a very important thing.

Do we see any examples of this in Scripture? I think we do in Mark chapter 2:

Mark 2:23-28 HCSB *On the Sabbath He was going through the grainfields, and His disciples began to make their way picking some heads of grain. (24) The Pharisees said to Him, "Look, why are they doing what is not lawful on the Sabbath?" (25) He said to them, "Have you never read what David and those who were with him did when he was in need and hungry-- (26) how he entered the house of God in the time of Abiathar the high priest and ate the sacred bread--which is not lawful for anyone to eat except the priests--and also gave some to his companions?" (27) Then He told them, "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath. (28) Therefore the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath."*

Here Jesus says the “small truth” of who could eat the sacred bread, was less important than satisfying the desperate hunger of David's men. Jesus then goes on to say “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” and furthermore says that He, the Son of Man is “Lord of the Sabbath”.

Jesus was very anti-nitpicking. He frequently upbraided the Pharisees for emphasizing the “small stuff” at the expense of the larger picture:

Matthew 12:7,8 *If you had known what this means: **I desire mercy and not sacrifice**, you would not have condemned the innocent. (8) For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."*

Matthew 9:11-13 HCSB *When the Pharisees saw this, they asked His disciples, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (12) But when He heard this, He said, "Those who are well don't need a doctor, but the sick do. (13) Go and learn what this means: **I desire mercy and not sacrifice**. For I didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners."*

Matthew 23:23-24 HCSB *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, yet you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. These things should have been done without neglecting the others. (24) Blind guides! You strain out a gnat, yet gulp down a camel!"*

Mark 7:6-13 HCSB *He answered them, "Isaiah prophesied correctly about you hypocrites, as it is written: **These people honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. (7) They worship Me in vain, teaching as doctrines the commands of men. (8) Disregarding the command of God, you keep the tradition of men.**" (9) He also said to them, "You completely invalidate God's command in order to maintain your tradition! (10) For Moses said: **Honor your father and your mother; and, Whoever speaks evil of father or mother must be put to death.** (11) But you say, 'If a man tells his father or mother: Whatever benefit you might have received from me is Corban'" (that is, a gift committed to the temple), (12) "you no longer let him do anything for his father or mother. (13) You revoke God's word by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many other similar things."*

Thus “living unto the Lord” first of all involves “practice of the 'weightier” matters of the Law” - justice, mercy and compassion, and minor matters of religious practice are not to take precedence over these things.

We are to live tolerantly with people who worship on different days of the week, or who have different dietary customs, or who raise their hands in worship, or who do not do so, or who like contemporary Christian music, or who prefer hymns and so on and so forth. As long as they do so “unto the Lord” with sincerity and gladness of heart, then we are to leave them well alone.

The bitterness and acrimony over bible versions, Christian music and the like is a sign of spiritual immaturity. (Now that is not to say that we should use the Watchtower Bible or any other gross mistranslation by cult groups). Division is far more harmful than “transgression” in such minor matters. Christians no longer go to war over the correct mode of baptism (as they did on the 16th century) and that is a very good thing. So with the Sabbath – according to Paul everyone is right - as long as they are fully convinced in their own mind and observe their tradition “as unto the Lord”! We call this the freedom of the Christian conscience.

Romans 14:9

The Universal Rule Of Christ

Romans 14:9 HCSB *Christ died and came to life for this: that He might rule over both the dead and the living.*

In the midst of Paul's explanation on Christian tolerance he “throws in” this sentence about the universal rule of Christ over all believers for all time. The idea is that Christ rules over all Christians for all time, whether we live, or whether we die. Therefore the Kingdom is very large, and by nature must include a wide range of people from different places and times and customs and ways of worship, therefore we need to accept this massive diversity of the Kingdom of God.

Yet there are other implications as well. For if Christ rules over the dead, then the dead are “conscious” in some way and continue to exist in such a state that it is meaningful to assert that Christ is their Lord.

Indeed Paul says that : *Christ died and came to life for this* -in other words the cross and the resurrection were “in order that” He would achieve dominion over both the living and the dead and that His love and justice would have full sway in the entire Universe both physical and spiritual.

Now if Christ is to have Lordship over the living, then all human institutions and governments and families and nations, all that we call “living” must finally submit to Him.

It is not as if Christ rules over the dead in Heaven while the Devil rules over politics down here! No such bargain has been struck! Indeed Christ has come to “undo the works of the Devil”.

1 John 3:8 MKJV *He who practices sin is of the Devil, for the Devil sins from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was revealed, that He might undo the works of the Devil.*

The incarnation, cross and resurrection were not just to save us, but also to form us into a Christ-governed people. The rebellion and iniquity in our hearts were to be uprooted and the work of the Devil in our soul was to be undone – along with his wicked works in the wider world. In the Christ-governed world evil will be rolled back.

Christ creates culture. He creates a new realm of mercy, grace, compassion and justice, a place of healing and sharing that we see during the high points in the gospels and in the Acts of the Apostles. This gracious rule of Christ over both the dead and the living is what we call the Kingdom of God.

Now Christ does not rule over tombstones and corpses and moldy coffins. Rather He rules over the spirits and souls of the departed saints that continue in some form of conscious and blessed existence in Heaven. While the wicked dead existence in a place of torment, a holding / remand cell, prior to the final judgment:

Luke 16:22-26 MKJV *And it happened that the beggar died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich one also died and was buried. (23) And in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. (24) And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame. (25) But Abraham said, Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things. But now he is comforted and you are tormented. (26) And besides all this, there is a great chasm fixed between you and us; so that they desiring to pass from here to you cannot, nor can they pass over to us from there.*

2 Peter 2:4 MKJV *For if God did not spare sinning angels, but thrust them down into Tartarus, and delivered them into chains of darkness, being reserved to judgment.*

Revelation 6:9-11 MKJV *And when He had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God, and for the testimony which they held. (10) And they cried with a loud voice, saying, Until when, Master, holy and true, do You not judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth? (11) And white robes were given to each one of them. And it was said to them that they should rest yet for a little time, until both their fellow servants and their brothers (those about to be killed as they were) should have their number made complete.*

Philippians 1:20-24 HCSB (20) *My eager expectation and hope is that I will not be ashamed about anything, but that now as always, with all boldness, Christ will be highly honored in my body, whether by life or by death. (21) For me, living is Christ and dying is gain. (22) Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me; and I don't know which one I should choose. (23) I am pressured by both. **I have the desire to depart and be with Christ--which is far better--** (24) but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.*

For Christians departing and being with Christ is “far better”, while for the unrepentant rich man and the fallen angels it was far worse! Lazarus and the souls under the altar received comfort from God, and were able to perceive others, see what was happening in the world and engage in conversations with those in Heaven.

Since Christ rules over all dimensions of space, time, culture and human experience we cannot confine Him to this or that particular cultural form – to long hair or short hair, to this food or that drink, to hymns or choruses, to Republicans or Democrats, to this race or that nation or to church buildings of a certain size and shape or to worship on this day or that. But each of us lives in a particular time and place and we each serve God in our own way, and through our own cultural forms and understandings. Such forms are important expressions of faith for us, but they are not universals, they do not express the faith for all time. Gothic cathedrals expressed the faith of their builders then, and surely brought glory to God in that age, but they do not dictate how we must worship today.

Because the Lordship of Christ's is universal the Christian faith is never captive to any set of cultural particulars – though they may usefully express the faith of a certain group of people at a certain moment in time.

Romans 14:10-13 **Do Not Judge One Another**

Romans 14:10-13 MKJV *But why do you judge your brother? Or also why do you despise your brother? For all shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ. (11) For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." (12) So then each one of us will give account concerning himself to God. (13) Then let us not judge one another any more, but rather judge this, not to put a stumbling-block or an offense toward his brother.*

We are not judges – Christ alone is the Judge and we will all stand before Him. And we will be judged with the same judgment with which we have judged others – so let us not judge anyone at all!

Weighing up how “spiritual” another Christian is, or judging their walk with God, is very common in some evangelical circles – but is completely wrong! We are not the judges of another Christian! It is simply not our business to make evaluations of how they observe the Sabbath, or about the food they eat or the clothes they wear or the music that they listen to!

There are three different Greek words that are often translated “judge” - the first is “krino” and is a judicial word meaning (according to Thayer's Lexicon): *to judge, to pronounce an opinion concerning right and wrong, to be judged, i.e. summoned to trial that one's case may be examined and judgment passed upon it, to pronounce judgment, to subject to censure. Of those who act the part of judges or arbiters in matters of common life, or pass judgment on the deeds and words of others*

Thus “krino” means to judge absolutely, to criticize, to take the whole person and say they are good or bad because of some factor. Only God can do this, and Christians are totally forbidden from making “krino” style absolute judgments about each other.

The second word is “diakrino” which means to “discern” and is used in a positive sense of self-judgment and personal inspection. Thayer's defines it as “discrimination” (in the positive sense as in a discriminating purchaser of antiques): *to separate, make a distinction, discriminate, to prefer, to learn by discrimination, to try, decide*

The other Greek word is “dokimazo” – which means to test or approve: *to test, examine, prove, scrutinise (to see whether a thing is genuine or not), as metals, to recognise as genuine after examination, to approve, deem worthy.* This is necessary part of spiritual wisdom 'testing the spirits" (1 John 4:1) and deciding between true and false doctrine. Gullibility is not a fruit of the Spirit! Nevertheless this is testing with the expectation that good will be found in the end. It is hopeful testing rather than destructive testing.

While Christians are to have active minds and alive critical faculties they are to be used constructively for rooting out sin and weakness within one's own heart and to test doctrines and spirits in a constructive and kind (but wise) fashion.

What Paul is against is the sort of pompous judging of other Christians that contains a large measure of contempt or disapproval: *Or also why do you despise your brother?* We commonly see this contempt with respect to “other denominations”: “those bible-bashing Baptists” “the chosen frozen”, “the crazy charismatics” and so on and so forth. Such talk violates the spirit of Christ and makes judgments that we should not be making!

Paul asks us to have a bit more humility and to remember that each of us will stand before the judgment seat of Christ. *For all shall stand before the judgment seat of Christ. (11) For it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God." (12) So then each one of us will give account concerning himself to God.*

Now this judgment by Christ is not a judgment as to our salvation (which was accomplished when we believed) but for our reward, and as an assessment of how we have lived our lives here on earth in obedience to Christ's commandments (1 Corinthians 3:10-15). It is our “giving an account” of how we served the Lord (v. 12).

2 Corinthians 5:10 MKJV (10) *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive the things done through the body, according to that which he has done, whether good or bad.*

1 Corinthians 3:12-15 MKJV (12) *And if anyone builds on this foundation gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, (13) each one's work shall be revealed. For the Day shall declare it, because it shall be revealed by fire; and the fire shall try each one's work as to what kind it is. (14) If anyone's work which he built remains, he shall receive a reward. (15) If anyone's work shall be burned up, he shall suffer loss. But he shall be saved, yet so as by fire.*

Jesus tells us that when we give our account the measure used to judge us – will be the measure that we used to judge others! O pity the strict, harsh, impatient and unkind souls on that Day!

Matthew 7:1-5 MKJV Judge not, that you may not be judged. (2) For with whatever judgment you judge, you shall be judged; and with whatever measure you measure out, it shall be measured to you again. (3) And why do you look on the splinter that is in your brother's eye, but do not consider the beam that is in your own eye? (4) Or how will you say to your brother, Let me pull the splinter out of your eye; and, behold, a beam is in your own eye? (5) Hypocrite! First cast the beam out of your own eye, and then you shall see clearly to cast the splinter out of your brother's eye.

Many who think they were “right” in judgment will be found wrong in love, mercy and compassion – which are the greatest of all!

Judging people causes them to become discouraged. Disapproval is an obstacle to fellowship and to Christian growth. Rather God wants a community of encouragers!

So Paul says: *Then let us not judge one another any more, but rather judge this, not to put a stumbling-block or an offense toward his brother.* Lets get out of the way of the growth of the saints – and stop judging one another!

Romans 14:14-17

The Nature Of The Kingdom

Romans 14:14-17 HCSB *(I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself. Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean.)* (15) *For if your brother is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. By what you eat, do not destroy that one for whom Christ died.* (16) *Therefore, do not let your good be slandered,* (17) *for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

What is the nature of the Kingdom of God? Is it all about externals (such as eating, drinking, and Sabbaths) or is the Kingdom all about internals (love, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit)? Paul comes down clearly and firmly on one side of this dispute. The Kingdom of God is about attitudes, and the disposition of our soul and spirit and not about what we wear or eat or drink, or about when we go to church!

Paul starts with an astonishing statement: *I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself.* Pork was not unclean “in itself” nor was wine, nor was beef or liver or snails or frog's legs. The idea of “unclean things” was removed by the Lord Jesus. It seems to have taken some time for Paul the former Pharisee to arrive at this remarkable conclusion because he says *I know and am persuaded by the Lord Jesus*

Jesus had to persuade Paul of this truth because it was not self-evident to Paul, in fact it went right against all of Paul's upbringing! The Pharisees believed in ritual contamination. That is if a holy thing touched and unclean thing, then the holy thing became unclean also. But Jesus reversed this!

When Jesus touched a dead body (like the girl on the bier) Jesus did not become unclean – rather the girl rose from the dead! And when Jesus touched a leper He did not become leprous or unclean – rather the leper became clean and whole and healed. And when Jesus was touched by a woman with the issue of

blood or came across a demoniac, He was not defiled, rather the person was healed and the demon cast out! Jesus taught and demonstrated with great clarity and frequent repetition that the power of the Holy Spirit was not diminished in any way by the impure, the unclean, the diseased, the demonic or the insane!

A preacher full of the Holy Spirit can go into a bar or a brothel and come out with converts and changed lives! A young preacher called David Wilkerson went to New York and even transformed a bikie gang! Corrie Ten Boom was alight in the darkness of Nazi concentration camps that did not destroy her soul, and Jackie Pullinger went into the opium dens of the Walled City of Hong Kong to minister Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit brought great Spirit-filled revival! Nothing is unclean to the person of faith!

The Paul adds a warning: *Still, to someone who considers a thing to be unclean, to that one it is unclean.* For instance to some people alcohol is unclean and they will never go to a bar, and it would hurt them spiritually to do so – and I respect that! For me playing tournament chess (which brought out a spirit of excessive competition) was unclean for a long while. It was something I simply could not do without sinning! There are limits to our faith!

I know Christians who minister to the porn industry and who attend conventions and shows in Las Vegas – and can do so successfully and without compromise. But for 99% of men that would be an absolute disaster! Paul warns us so we don't go too far in our freedom. We have to combine Jesus' call to freedom with his call to holiness! (Scriptures always have to be interpreted in balance with each other).

So when a person of strong faith for whom X is clean, meets a person of weak faith for whom X is unclean – who gives way? The person of strong faith should respect the feelings of the person with weaker faith in the matter: *For if your brother is hurt by what you eat, you are no longer walking according to love. By what you eat, do not destroy that one for whom Christ died.*

In other words if I prefer a good California red wine, and my brother in Christ believes wine is sinful – then it is up to me to give way and I should not partake in his or her presence. I don't want to stumble an alcoholic, I don't want to hurt a single soul, so the communion will be with grape juice!

Liberty has to be exercised with love and consideration for those around me *do not destroy that one for whom Christ died* is a powerful principle! If Christ died for them, then we should nurture them and love them and respect their spiritual sensitivities. This includes such things as not having vigorous theological debates in front of new believers. Exposing young Christians to some scholars' doubts about the Canon of Scripture or the Trinity does far more harm than good!

Paul then brings the debate around to the nature of the Kingdom of God: *Therefore, do not let your good be slandered, (17) for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.*

In other words do not let what is good to you, be spoken of as evil, because it destroyed someone of weaker faith. I like peanuts. But to some people with peanut allergies they are potentially fatal. The good thing – peanuts, would be spoken of as evil if I was so insensitive as to give peanuts to someone who had the allergy. Does that mean that everyone has to stop eating peanuts? No! They are good! But you must not give them to your brother who has a peanut allergy! (And that principle can be applied to many things). We must walk in love and consideration.

The Kingdom of God is not about the externals of what you do or do not eat or drink. It is about how you act towards other people in love. It is the hidden internal stuff of the heart and the transformational work of God in us producing righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Lets summarize this with a few principles:

1. Nothing is unclean in and of itself.
2. The power of the Holy Spirit is so great that it overcomes ritual uncleanness - and redemption is more powerful than sin.
3. But we cannot go around playing with fire. If it is unclean to you, then its unclean. If in doubt – don't!
4. The stronger in faith gives way to the weaker – we may have to give up some freedoms to ensure others are not injured in their Christian life.
5. The focus of the Christian life should not be on external conformity to rules about what we can eat or drink, or when we should go to church.
6. The focus of the Christian life should be on internal conformity to Christ-likeness e.g. love, righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Romans 14:18-23

Stumbling One's Brother

Romans 14:18-23 MKJV *For he who serves Christ in these things is well-pleasing to God, and approved by men. (19) So then let us pursue the things of peace, and the things for building up one another. (20) Do not undo the work of God for food. Truly, all things indeed are clean, but it is bad to the man eating because of a stumbling-block. (21) It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine, nor anything by which your brother stumbles, or is offended, or is made weak. (22) Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Blessed is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. (23) But, the one doubting, if he eats, he has been condemned, because it is not of faith; and all that is not of faith is sin.*

1. We are to serve Christ in “these things” that is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. (17,18)
2. We are to pursue “the things of peace” - harmony in the Christian community
3. We are to build each other up
4. We are not to “undo the work of God for food” - that is use our freedom in Christ to upset another person's weaker faith
5. We are to restrain our liberty so as not to cause a brother to stumble, be spiritually offended, or made weak
6. We can still exercise our freedom to ourselves, before God.
7. If our faith and conscience is pure about what we approve then we are blessed
8. But if we find something to be doubtful – then don't do it. If it is not according to our faith and conscience then it is sin.

Lets take some controversial examples: tithing, drinking alcohol and attending church on Sunday. Each of these is a “strong matter of conscience” to some people and “not a problem” to others. Arguments rage about the rights and wrongs of these issues. As we have seen earlier on in this chapter “both sides are right” and should live in peace. If someone wants to attend church regularly each Sunday “unto the Lord” that is fine, if someone things Saturday is better or any day at all and does so “unto the Lord” that is fine too. Both sides should learn to get along! And if someone believes in being a teetotaler, that is good if they do so unto the Lord, and if someone drinks wine and praises God, that is also fine (as long as they do not get drunk), and if someone tithes exactly ten percent and gives diligently and faithfully unto the Lord they are blessed, and if another person gives 8% or 15% or whatever they feel moved to by the grace of God and

do so unto the Lord, that is fine as well. Both sides are right – and the important thing is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, not the formula, not the exactly right religious practice!

However – and it is a BIG however, we are automatically WRONG if we exercise our freedom in a way that stumbles our brother. If I were to drink around a teetotaler – then I could hurt that person and cause spiritual damage, around an alcoholic - I could even destroy them! This is wrong, plain wrong! I am never to exercise my freedom in a way that stumbles, offends or makes weak a brother!

Yet that does not mean that I am at the mercy of every legalistic and hyper-sensitive individual. Just because someone is offended by the car I drive, or the clothes I wear, or by my Australian accent does not mean I have to change! We are free to be ourselves in the Lord. However when it really is a spiritual issue for that person we should compromise.

Should Christian women wear mini-skirts? Is a brother stumbled by this? Surely he sees worse on TV or at the office? Yet it does not help! It adds to the burden of temptation, and is perhaps best avoided. Consideration means modesty – for both men and women.

On issue after issue we have to balance our freedom with the spiritual effects of our actions. Mini-skirts, lottery tickets, Sabbaths, meat offered to idols, alcohol, tithing or grace giving, or even driving an SUV or Hybrid can be contentious issues.

In the end we have to make up our own mind according to our own conscience. *Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Blessed is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves.*

And if we do decide that something is doubtful or off-limits then we should abide by that and not try to do things just for the sake of “personal liberation”: *But, the one doubting, if he eats, he has been condemned, because it is not of faith; and all that is not of faith is sin.*

If you feel bad about not tithing – then you must tithe! If you feel guilty when you take a drink – then don't drink. If you feel something is wrong if you are not at church on Sunday – then you must go to church! You cannot violate your conscience but you can slowly reeducate it.

The apostle Peter was very strict about what he would and would not eat until Jesus showed him a vision and told him to eat that which Peter considered unclean. Then Peter had trouble visiting Gentiles – until God showed him that too was OK (see Acts chapters 10 and 11).

As our faith grows, so does our freedom in Christ. The “rules” we were so worried about before, rules about eating and drinking and Sabbaths and clean and unclean and Christmas and Easter - all fade away (see Colossians 2:8-23).

Yet there are some folk for whom those rules are still very important. To a new Christian in 45 AD eating a pork chop may have seemed like a terrible sin (if they were from a Jewish background) and serving them pork could have stumbled them in their obedience to God. In the end it is not pork that matters – but people.

Romans 15:1-3

Building Up Our Neighbor

Romans 15:1-3 HCSB Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. (2) Each one of us must please his neighbor for his good, in order to build him up. (3) For even the Messiah did not please Himself. On the contrary, as it is written, **The insults of those who insult You have fallen on Me.**

There is a certain amount of proper inconvenience and self-restraint in being a Christian. The Christian life is not “all about me” or about “self-fulfillment”, rather it is about community, grace, edification and loving “one another”.

The strong have an obligation toward the weak – to help them, to bless them, to strengthen them and to be considerate toward them. If someone is limping, we slow down, give them a hand and go together with them to their destination. This applies also to spiritual things. It is a team effort and we need to “slow down” and help the weaker brothers in our midst. The person we please is our neighbor – and not ourselves: *Now we who are strong have an obligation to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and not to please ourselves. (2) Each one of us must please his neighbor for his good, in order to build him up.*

Jesus had every right to please Himself. He could have asked God for a gold chariot and a grand palace and been perfectly worthy of them! Instead of living the high life, He chose the life of incarnate humility – even to the point of accepting scorn and derision: *For even the Messiah did not please Himself. On the contrary, as it is written, **The insults of those who insult You have fallen on Me.***

Jesus accepted suffering, and insults and even died on a cross, so that others (you and I) might find salvation. So also you and I must be prepared to be “put out” a little for others. As a missionary that may involve living at the level of the community rather than the level I am used to “back home”. After all that is what Jesus did. For most people it may involve smaller sacrifices such as using non-theological language when conversing with new believers or not having materials around the house that would cause spiritual confusion for a visitor. Or it may be something as simple as not rushing home after church but instead stopping and greeting new people and asking them out for lunch.

The old adage, *God first, others second, self last* - is a good one and fits with much NT teaching and with the example set by the courageous redemptive suffering of Christ and His apostles.

There is much self-centered Christian teaching around today about how we can have “the life we want now”. Instead we should be teaching: “How you can help others to have salvation in Christ”! It is not about our personal comfort, rather it is about the other person's eternal salvation.

As a bible teacher one issue that bothers me is the price of Christian resources. Too often good resources are priced at commercial rates, and yet the costs of production are subsidized through faith giving to the ministry. This means the profit margins are huge. As well as that the ministry is tax exempt and probably pays lower than average wages. Such a ministry is not passing these lower costs on to the consumer, or to the staff, or to the government or to the community in general, rather it goes to enrich the leadership or to enlarge the premises. This may be good business but students at bible colleges, who can seldom afford it, are paying top dollar for materials that can and should be supplied at a much lower price. Such organizations are not acting to “edify their neighbor” but rather simply to increase their wealth. This was never the apostolic mindset.

Every ministry worthy of the name should consider the needs of those they minister to be first and foremost – and profits should be way down the list of priorities. There is way too much “commercialized Christianity” and way too little apostolic and redemptive simplicity.

Peter once said to Jesus 'we have given up all to follow You" (Matthew 19:27). That is the true apostolic spirit! Peter and Paul did not please themselves but followed Christ and built up His Church!

Self-denial is not good in and of itself. Paul knocks that squarely on the head in Colossians 2:18-23. We are not Christian masochists.

Yet self-denial is needed because it is an essential part of building up our neighbor. Building others up takes consideration and care and time and thought and money and sacrifice. Jesus did not go to the cross as a form of self-flagellation, He went to the cross because it was necessary for our salvation and we are to do likewise:

1 John 3:16-18 MKJV *By this we have known the love of God, because He laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. (17) But whoever has this world's goods and sees his brother having need, and shuts up his bowels from him, how does the love of God dwell in him? (18) My children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.*

In fact our works and our reward are grounded in our self-denial for the cause of the Cross:

Matthew 16:24-27 MKJV *Then Jesus said to His disciples, If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. (25) For whoever desires to save his life shall lose it, and whoever desires to lose his life for My sake shall find it. (26) For what is a man profited if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? (27) For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He shall reward each one according to his works.*

Therefore let us not just please ourselves, but instead let us accept the inconvenience and restraints, and take up the cross that comes as we serve others in the Spirit.

Romans 15:4

Hope From The Bible

Romans 15:4 MKJV *For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, so that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.*

Some Christians dismiss the Old Testament, but Paul says that it was still of great value: “whatever things were written before were written for our learning” - and at this point in Christian history the “things written before” were the OT Scriptures.

Paul also wrote to the Corinthians about the continuing relevance of OT examples (in this case of God's discipline of Israel in the wilderness).

1 Corinthians 10:11 MKJV *(11) And all these things happened to them as examples; and it is written for our warning on whom the ends of the world have come.*

And the Scriptures Timothy would have known as a child would have been the current books of the Old Testament:

2 Timothy 3:14-17 MKJV *But continue in the things that you have learned and have been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned them, (15) and that from a babe you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. (16) All Scripture is God-breathed, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (17) that the man of God may be perfected, thoroughly furnished to every good work.*

Paul tells us that the Scriptures are a source of hope: *so that we through patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.* In the trials of life it is often a word from the Bible that brings light and hope into our life. But this often needs to be combined with patience as we wait for the word from God to become manifest in our lives. It is this waiting on the word of God that builds character into our lives. The impatient person ends up hope-less because they always give up or take a short-cut before God's word has a chance to blossom into reality.

This is especially true in situations of injustice and great suffering such as the persecutions that came upon the early Christians in Rome. It is not easy to suffer at any time, and undeserved suffering can be especially difficult to bear. To see relatives and fellow-believers dragged off and crucified, or used as human torches to light processions must have been truly dreadful (though the worst persecutions may have occurred after Romans was written). Even in such dreadful situations the Scriptures, patiently borne, would have been a great source of hope as they told of a just and loving God who would reward them with eternal life, and who would punish their enemies on the Day of Judgment.

2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 MKJV *(5) For this is a manifest token of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God for which you also suffer, (6) since it is a righteous thing with God to repay tribulation to those who trouble you, (7) and to give rest with us to you who are troubled, at the revealing of the Lord Jesus from Heaven with the angels of His power, (8) in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, (9) who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, (10) when He shall come to be glorified in His saints and to be admired in all those who believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that Day.*

Having solid hope in the Scriptures will see us through this life and lay a solid foundation for the life to come. By contrast, putting one's hope in people, or money, or governments or political parties or even in success formulas – is a sure path to ultimate disappointment.

The mature Christian is one who can patiently trust in the promises of God without doubting and without taking unethical short-cuts to the desired end. The apostle Peter, in his second epistle, gives a beautiful snapshot of what this process is like:

2 Peter 1:2-8 MKJV *Grace and peace be multiplied to you through the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, (3) according as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who has called us to glory and virtue, (4) through which He has given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, so that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. (5) But also in this very thing, bringing in all diligence, filling out your faith with virtue, and with virtue, knowledge; (6) and with knowledge self-control, and with self-control, patience, and with patience, godliness, (7) and with godliness, brotherly kindness, and with brotherly kindness, love. (8) For if these things are in you and abound, they make you to be neither idle nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

In the central place in Christian growth are phrases such as “*through the knowledge of Him*” and “*through which He has given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, so that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature*”. As we get to know God and as we rely on His wonderful promises the rest unfolds around us – and this knowledge of God and His promises almost entirely comes from the Bible.

It is as we steadfastly believe what is written in the Bible, including the Old Testament, that we come to know God and grow in faith. Note that I say “believe” not just “know”. We have to trust the Scriptures, and hang on them as true words from God with real application to our lives. The key example here is Abraham trusting God for the birth of Isaac despite the discouraging external realities.

Romans 4:18-22 MKJV *For he who beyond hope believed on hope for him to become the father of many nations (according to that which was spoken, "So your seed shall be"). (19) And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body already dead (being about a hundred years old) or the deadening of Sarah's womb. (20) He did not stagger at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God, (21) and being fully persuaded that what God had promised, He was also able to perform. (22) And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.*

Let us therefore take solid refuge in the Scriptures knowing that in trusting God's promises we shall find hope in the midst of life!

Romans 15:5-7

Being Like-Minded

Romans 15:5-7 HCSB *Now may the God of endurance and encouragement grant you agreement with one another, according to Christ Jesus, (6) so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with a united mind and voice. (7) Therefore accept one another, just as the Messiah also accepted you, to the glory of God.*

Romans 15:5-7 MKJV *And may the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like minded toward one another according to Christ Jesus, (6) so that with one mind and one mouth you may glorify God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (7) Therefore receive one another as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.*

These verses tell us that Christian unity is first a gift of God “*grant you to be like-minded*” and secondly an act of obedience “*therefore accept one another*” that results in clearly manifest glory for God: “*glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*” “*to the glory of God*”.

It is the character of God manifest in us and among us that allows us to put up with one another – which is why Paul calls on “*the God of endurance and encouragement*” also translated as “*the God of patience and consolation*”. God is not touchy, prickly or defensive. Rather He is patient, kind and encouraging! These are great “*team player*” qualities that help Christians to hang in there together among all the tests and challenges of Christian fellowship.

The phrase “*agreement with one another*” or “*like-minded toward one another*” is “*phronein en allelois*” which can be translated “*interested in one another*” or “*thoughtful toward one another*”. *Phronein* is from the Greek word family that describes cognition (*phroneo*) and means to think about, or to pay attention to. Unity comes from caring about one another and being actually interested in each other.

So far we have a community of people that is interested in one another and is patient and encouraging toward one another – that is a pretty good start! This community then proceeds to worship as one: *so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with a united mind and voice.*

The Greek for “united mind” is homothumadon which (according to Thayer's Lexicon) means “with one mind, with one accord, with one passion”. It is almost like we are a large group climbing a mountain with God at the summit. As we get closer to God, we also automatically get closer to one another and to a community that is in spiritual and emotional harmony.

The Spirit-led community has “one mouth” and in the early days of the Jerusalem Church it was the apostle Peter that was the spokesperson for the Church when it engaged the outside world. Christian unity means that we will not be contradicting each other publicly all the time. At times this will mean that we support our pastor or other spokesperson and that we as a group will stand together and speak as one for God.

Freedom of speech is not the same as freedom to tear each other apart with squabbling. Sometimes we must bridle our tongue – out of love. The Christian mind and heart is not about self-expression, but about Christ-expression!

Unity has a tremendous spiritual power both on earth and in the spiritual realms (Matthew 18:19). So when we manifest this spiritual, intellectual, emotional and verbal unity we bring great glory to God.

Our unity is to be based on mutual acceptance, which in turn is to be based on our acceptance in Christ. If Christ has accepted you, then I must not reject you, otherwise I am going against God. Who am I to condemn that which God has already accepted? And who is any man or woman who dares to condemn what Christ has justified through the Cross?

To say that another Christian is “unacceptable” is to say that God is wrong, or at least that He is badly mistaken in dying for, saving, redeeming and loving such a person. Now which are we to abide by – human social convention or divine mercy? If we judge others without mercy – then God will also do the same to us!

James 2:1-13 HCSB *My brothers, hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ without showing favoritism. (2) For suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring, dressed in fine clothes, and a poor man dressed in dirty clothes also comes in. (3) If you look with favor on the man wearing the fine clothes so that you say, "Sit here in a good place," and yet you say to the poor man, "Stand over there," or, "Sit here on the floor by my footstool," (4) haven't you discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (5) Listen, my dear brothers: Didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that He has promised to those who love Him? (6) Yet you dishonored that poor man. Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts? (7) Don't they blaspheme the noble name that you bear? (8) If you really carry out the royal law prescribed in Scripture, **You shall love your neighbor as yourself**, you are doing well. (9) But if you show favoritism, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors. (10) For whoever keeps the entire law, yet fails in one point, is guilty of breaking it all. (11) For He who said, **Do not commit adultery**, also said, **Do not murder**. So if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you are a lawbreaker. (12) Speak and act as those who will be judged by the law of freedom. (13) For judgment is without mercy to the one who hasn't shown mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

Race, wealth, age, fashion, and other social factors should not determine whether or not someone is acceptable to us or not. If Christ has accepted them – then we must accept them also.

People notice unity. It is one of the marks of true Christianity:

John 13:34-35 HCSB *"I give you a new commandment: love one another. Just as I have loved you, you must also love one another. (35) By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."*

Unity is a God-given discipline that we practice in love and out of care and consideration for each other. We are to be interested in one another, patient, kind and encouraging, and accepting of each other - because Christ has also accepted us!

One further thought – if Christ has accepted you, then you need to accept yourself!

Romans 15:8-12

The Salvation Of The Gentiles

Romans 15:8-12 HCSB *Now I say that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God, to confirm the promises to the fathers, (9) and so that Gentiles may glorify God for His mercy. As it is written: Therefore I will praise You among the Gentiles, and I will sing psalms to Your name. (10) Again it says: Rejoice, you Gentiles, with His people! (11) And again: Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; all the peoples should praise Him! (12) And again, Isaiah says: The root of Jesse will appear, the One who rises to rule the Gentiles; in Him the Gentiles will hope.*

The “promise to the fathers” (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) was that “in you all the nations of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 18:18) which of course includes the Gentiles. In fact the Holy Spirit coming upon the Gentiles was seen as an integral part of the Abrahamic blessing:

Galatians 3:13-14 HCSB *Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written: Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree. (14) The purpose was that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, so that we could receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

What Paul is trying to say is that the Gentiles owe their salvation to promises that were originally made to Jews. Remember there were divisions in the mainly Gentile Roman church and a fracturing with Jewish Christians so that Paul spent chapters 9-11 explaining that the Jews were not cast off and rejected, and chapter 14 carving out some space for Jewish Sabbath observance and dietary customs, and now Paul gets back to his theme of unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians by pointing out that:

1. The salvation of the Gentiles depended on promises originally made to Jews.
2. That the Jews, on the other hand, were to view the salvation of the Gentiles, as the full flowering of the religion of YHWH and the promises made to the patriarchs.

Therefore there was to be no separation between Jew and Gentile, because the Gentiles depended on the “root” that was God's dealings with the Jews, and the Jews were to see the salvation of the Gentiles as the crowning achievement of their faith.

Paul illustrates this with a clutch of OT quotes introduced by “it is written”:

As it is written: Therefore I will praise You among the Gentiles, and I will sing psalms to Your name. (10) Again it says: Rejoice, you Gentiles, with His people! (11) And again: Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles; all the peoples should praise Him! (12) And again, Isaiah says: The root of Jesse will appear, the One who rises to rule the Gentiles; in Him the Gentiles will hope.

The formula “it is written” was used when quoting the Bible in a very formal and powerful way much as a lawyer quotes the Constitution during a legal battle in the Supreme Court. It was used by Jesus when disputing with the Devil in the wilderness and the form of the Greek verb (perfect) is that of a “completed past action with continuing force and consequences into the present” e.g.

Matthew 4:3-4 HCSB *Then the tempter approached Him and said, "If You are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." (4) But He answered, "It is written: Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."*

So in the legal battle over Jewish – Gentile unity Paul brings four quotes that cover the main sections of Jewish Scripture (the Law, the Writings, and the Prophets). Two quotes were from the Psalms (the Writings), one from Deuteronomy (the Torah / Law), and one from Isaiah (the prophets). (In order quoted they are: Psalm 18:49, Deuteronomy 32:43, Psalm 117:1, Isaiah 11:10)

Thus the Abrahamic covenant, the Law, the Writings and the Prophets are all brought to bear on the conclusion that it was always God's intention for the Gentiles to hope in Christ. This was a devastating argument for those who saw Christianity as being solely Jewish affair with Jesus as solely a Jewish Messiah. The verses Paul quotes show that the Messiah would be for the Gentiles also.

On the other hand the Gentiles would have to acknowledge that their Messiah was a Jew and that their salvation came to them along Jewish railroad tracks. The root of the olive tree of faith was Israel.

On a practical note we need to take heed of Paul's high regard for Scripture and the formula "it is written". The Bible was Paul's constitution and every word had true and absolute legal force – including the Old Testament, though it was interpreted through the later revelation that came in Christ.

Even though Paul made it very clear that the OT law was no longer the covenant that bound Christian believers and that we were dead to the Law (Romans chapters 6-8) he still respects the written word of God and does not jettison it. Rather Paul reinterprets it in the light of the cross, yet sees every single word as authoritative, inerrant and infallible.

Paul saw Christ as the center of Scripture and since the Book was about Jesus and revealed Jesus then Jesus was the master key and master interpreter of the whole. By looking to Christ Paul could see what applied "after the cross" and what needed to be reinterpreted.

We need to revere the Word of God and to take it with absolute seriousness, not as just a "guide to daily living" or an encouraging verse like a greeting card, or an intellectual plaything. It is a RULE for daily living (not just a guide that makes suggestions which we can take or leave) and it is the inspired spiritual word of God, and it is the complete Truth that our minds must shape themselves to instead!

Romans 15:13

The God Of Hope

Romans 15:13 HCSB *Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.*

How can a God who knows everything have hope? Surely hope depends on incomplete knowledge? How can we anticipate a sure thing? I think back to my twelfth birthday when I was given a watch. I knew I would receive that watch, but it was really special and I looked forward to it with great intensity. It was hope in a reward that I had literally waited for years to receive (this gives away my age and my era...) and I never doubted it but I still hoped for it. Hope is in our hearts as the future unfolds towards a good and certain ending.

God knows how we are going to turn out, He knows we will become immortal, imperishable, glorious, spiritual sons of God without spot or wrinkle and that Jesus will be the first among many brethren from every tribe and tongue and nation who will worship before the throne. God is delighting in this outcome and so is full of glorious hope. He is the God of hope because He knows the wonderful ending of the story of this Age.

Because God's purposes are always unfolding towards glorious and wonderful ends there will always be hope. **1 Corinthians 13:13 HCSB** (13) *Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.*

This verse follows on after Paul's discussion of the salvation of the Gentiles (v. 8-12) and his assertion that this was part of God's glorious plan from long ago. Just as God hoped and delighted in the salvation of the Greeks and Romans and Scythians and so forth so He has other great purposes that He is working out even today.

When despair grips our heart we need to place ourselves in God's great unfolding plan of redemption and realize that He will "work all things together for good" (Romans 8:28). Our hope is grounded in God's own hope in the absolutely certain outworking of His plans towards the creation of a world "in which righteousness dwells".

2 Peter 3:13 MKJV *But according to His promise, we look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.*

Our hope is based on trust in God's good processes; the slow, sure processes of justice, redemption and unfolding glorification:

Romans 8:28-30 MKJV *And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. (29) For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, for Him to be the First-born among many brothers. (30) But whom He predestined, these He also called; and whom He called, those He also justified. And whom He justified, these He also glorified.*

God's continuous hopeful intervention in human history is a far cry from evolution – where things improve themselves by random mutation and natural selection. The divine "working all things together for good" is a moral and spiritual action that involves the whole universe and is not in any way "accidental".

As we grasp the fact that the end of the Story is always good and always joyful then we can be “filled with joy and peace in believing”. The hope we have in who God is and in the way God works gives us a sure joy and a deep peace.

Now faith in God's processes is different from hope in a particular outcome – such as a large house or a red Mercedes-Benz. Sometimes God fills us with hope in a concrete and particular outcome such as Abraham's faith in the birth of Isaac but at other times we are called to a faith like Job's – that in the midst of pain God would turn up and work redemption “ I know that my redeemer liveth and will take His stand upon the earth.”

We can make big mistakes when we decide to put our hope not in God's character or ways of working - but in some cherished thing such as someone loving us, or a certain level of lifestyle or a certain problem being solved in a certain way. When this does not happen we feel disappointed in God. Yet God may be leading us through the trial to a deeper and less superficial form of faith. A faith in the invisible rather than in the visible. (Now I am not saying that we should not pray for tangible things such as healing, just that we should do so with faith in God and the way He works.)

The God of hope wants His sons and daughters to be people of hope who are confident that the end of all things will be good and will be joyful. God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all – no despair, no pessimism, no unbelief, no cynicism, no negativity, no wet blanket theology, no small-minded fault-finding and no dream-stealing AT ALL! Now we are to be like Him (1 John 3:1-3) and to walk in the light as He is in the light and to be positive and hopeful as He is positive and hopeful.

1 John 1:5-7 MKJV *And this is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all. (6) If we say that we have fellowship with Him and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. (7) But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.*

The old man is a grumpy, cynical worldly-wise pessimist – but the new man is hopeful with the power of God “so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” The Holy Spirit assures us that we are God's and that we are loved by Him and reveals to us the wonderful things God has in store for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9-16). When I feel that I am sinful and wretched and hope-less then the Holy Spirit tells me that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses me from all sin, that I am justified and acceptable to God, and that a wonderful eternity awaits me so I can have hope!

Romans 15:14 MKJV *And I myself also am persuaded of you, my brothers, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another.*

Paul writes to the Roman church and:

1. addresses them as equals, even as brothers
2. says they are full of goodness
3. acknowledges they are knowledgeable
4. and are “able to admonish one another” - that is to exercise spiritual discernment and appropriate personal and teaching ministry

In other words Paul, while being an apostle with a deep revelation of God, does not see himself as “the expert” . Paul gives his readers due credit because he knew that the same Holy Spirit and Jesus Christ that was in him - was also in them.

This raises the whole question of the appropriateness of lay ministry and the role of full-time ministers of the gospel. Paul is clear about two things here a) lay ministers can be able, trustworthy and knowledgeable b) that apostles (and other full-time workers) have a special authority that allows Paul to write the epistle in the first place.

I have known many good solid deacons and elders who do a very faithful job of leading bible studies and discipling young Christians. Mature Christians should not be stifled but should be allowed to use their gifts in a worthy manner. On the other hand the lay ministers are not theologians or missionaries or evangelists – and most will readily and openly acknowledge that. There are still some high-level jobs that do require years of solid theological training whether we like it or not.

However the most common failing is a failure to train, equip and send lay ministers into the Harvest. We “professionals” tend to keep things to ourselves. Or we demand too much training and then give too little responsibility to very capable people. Our egos can be easily threatened by highly capable lay leaders.

Yet revival and the training of non-ordained ministers of the gospel go hand in hand throughout Church history. As the saints are “equipped for the work of the ministry” (Ephesians 4:11) much more ministry gets carried out.

We also need to define “ministry” in much broader terms. It is not just what happens for ninety minutes on a Sunday morning in a church building. Writing a devotional on the Internet or having a Christian blog or handing out tracts is also ministry as is feeding the homeless, visiting the sick, meeting one on one with new believers, and a host of other things such as ministry to shut-ins, singles and the elderly. While only a few people can preach or lead worship on Sunday, every mature Christian can have one of these other kinds of ministries in the “outside world” and this expansion outside the church walls is what brings revival to the city.

If the Roman believers were so capable – why then did Paul write his epistle to them? Because good, deep, solid training that is both theological (Romans 1-8), situational (Romans 9-11) and practical (Romans 12-16) is a key component for equipping the laity to minister skilfully and well.

Campus Crusade came up with the idea of Transferable Concepts – ten booklets that simply explained key theological and practical concepts such as assurance of salvation, praying the Spirit, loving in the Spirit and so forth so that average folk who could be trained and then transfer this training on to others.

2 Timothy 2:2 MKJV *And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit the same to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*

Many others since then have come up with various training tools that help believers to mature in their faith and to go out and “do the stuff” of ministry. (Personal plug: you will find many such tools on the AIBI website at www.aibi.ph)

Can we then dispense with the M.Div. And higher level training? Not at all, it still has its place especially when major controversies arise and expert opinions are needed or when the faith needs defending from error.

However “lay people” can be knowledgeable, discerning, and full of goodness (virtue is not exclusively limited to the clergy PTL!) and able to admonish and correct people (sometimes even including the pastor!). They should be trained up and unleashed to reach the lost, visit the sick, help the widows and so on and so forth. They do not need to be up front on Sunday morning, indeed that sort of attention can ruin a new Christian, but they do need to exercise their faith and use their spiritual gifts. If the silent majority can be carefully trained, step by step, and motivated, prayed for and sent out into the community then a might revival might just sweep across the land!

Some things ALL Christians should be trained in are:

1. Prayer and intercession - especially how to pray for the lost and for their nation
2. Deliverance – casting out of demons and praying for the sick as the elders in James were required to do. As they pray for their friends and family many members will be added to the church!
3. Witnessing – how to share their faith in the power of the Holy Spirit and how to teach new converts the basics of the Christian faith (Priscilla and Aquila)
4. Acts of compassion – how to wisely and effectively help folk who need it most (as Dorcas did)

Imagine the impact as hundreds of prayed up, Spirit-filled believers, full of goodness and wisdom go out into your community to minister in the name of Jesus!

Romans 15:15-19 MKJV *But, brothers, I wrote to you boldly, as reminding you in part, because of the grace that is given to me by God, (16) that I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the nations, ministering the gospel of God, so that the offering up of the nations might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (17) Therefore I have boasting in Christ Jesus as to the things pertaining to God. (18) For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ did not work out by me for the obedience of the nations in word and deed, (19) in power of miracles and wonders, in power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem, and all around to Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ.*

Some people tap into God very deeply and have His power flowing through them “in word and deed, in power of miracles and wonders, in power of the Spirit of God”. I have been thinking about this a lot lately after seeing programs on Adolf Hitler and on Alexander the Great both of whom achieved great (though temporary and evil) power through the use of the occult. It led me to think “if the Devil can give spectacular victories to people how much more can God do?” then I realized that the power of God operates entirely differently. The power of God does not produce dictators, it produces saints instead! The power of God aims at quality of character not quantity of conquest!

The Devil produces Hitler, Stalin, Alexander the Great, Papa Doc and Idi Amin. God produces Paul, Augustine of Hippo, St. Francis of Assisi, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa and Billy Graham.

Now Paul could have been a very successful member of the Jewish ruling elite. But he chose Christ instead and the power of the Holy Spirit, not the power of self, or the power of the Devil. When the broken Paul let God take him over there was a realigning of the source of personal power. God came in and became the locus for all Paul's actions so that he could only describe himself as someone “crucified” and could say “it is no longer I who liveth but Christ who liveth in me.”

As a result of this surrender to the Holy Spirit and to the dynamic working of Christ within him Paul's ministry was characterized by signs and wonders and the Spirit of God!

I think part of the reason we see so few miracles is because of prayer-less, un-surrendered lives particularly among some Christian leaders. We need to be immersed in God, and to let God flow through us!

Paul's consecration went all the way to his identity which was as a “minister of Jesus Christ to the nations”. The Greek word for minister here is not the usual “diakonos” (deacon) but the more specialized “leitourgos” - which means a priest, worshipper or functionary and in the NT is used of people performing priestly work such as sacrifices and offerings. It is mainly used for “full-time” ministers of the gospel. Here Paul is the “priest” who presents the Gentiles as a fully acceptable offering to God – without spot or blemish, sanctified and holy. Paul's identity was of someone preparing people for God so that God might be pleased with them as an “acceptable offering”. (We are obviously not talking about literal human sacrifice but rather about a consecrated life.)

The goal of Paul's ministry was “obedience in both word and deed”. Too often we are satisfied with words, with students who can recite the correct answers, rather than living correct lives. These days many modern seminary students know a great deal of Greek and with the latest computer bible aids can do wonderful bible and archaeological study. On a cognitive level they would know far more than the simple preaching saints of old such as St. Francis of Assisi! But despite all this extra knowledge often their lives do not match up. There needs to be a profoundly changed lifestyle so that we are conformed in our behavior to biblical Christian teaching such as the Sermon On The Mount.

As pastors, missionaries, bible teachers and Christian leaders we cannot be satisfied with disobedience. It is not “just sinful human nature” to be excused and even pandered to. Paul wrote that he wanted their “obedience to be complete” (2 Corinthians 10:6). We cannot let people off half way – even if they do not much like the process of being conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. We do them eternal damage and leave them as incomplete human beings when we indulge their sins.

In order to have the strength and energy to shape people and nations and to do signs and wonders Paul had to rely totally on Jesus Christ. Without divine authority Paul had no authority. Without divine answers to prayer Paul had no miracles, signs or wonders. Success for Paul was not dependent on fundraising or politics but on the Holy Ghost.

So dependent on Christ was he that Paul boasted of nothing except what Christ had done through him: **Romans 15:17-19 HCSB** *Therefore I have reason to boast in Christ Jesus regarding what pertains to God. (18) For I would not dare say anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to make the Gentiles obedient by word and deed, (19) by the power of miraculous signs and wonders, and by the power of God's Spirit. As a result, I have fully proclaimed the good news about the Messiah from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum.*

In other words “it wasn't me, it was God”. Paul was very careful about pride creeping into his ministry and diminishing his effectiveness, sanctification and reward. *For I would not dare say anything except what Christ has accomplished through me* is powerful language! Paul was not going to boast of his heritage or his intellect or his business ability or his great tent-making skills – but only in Christ, and even then only about what God had done through him.

Paul was humble so God could pour out His grace into Paul's life and make it a mighty life. Back to our theme – the Devil produces proud dictators with temporary fiefdoms, but on the other hand Christ produces humble saints with holy lives that have an eternal impact. The power of God in us may not make us great and famous in a worldly sense but it will give us the means to fulfill our ministry and preach the gospel in our sphere of influence: *As a result, I have fully proclaimed the good news about the Messiah from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum.*

Romans 15:20-24 HCSB So my aim is to evangelize where Christ has not been named, in order that I will not be building on someone else's foundation, (21) but, as it is written: "Those who had no report of Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand." (22) That is why I have been prevented many times from coming to you. (23) But now I no longer have any work to do in these provinces, and I have strongly desired for many years to come to you (24) whenever I travel to Spain. For I do hope to see you when I pass through, and to be sent on my way there by you, once I have first enjoyed your company for a while.

For Paul the unreached took priority over the reached – even if the “reached” were high profile and important Romans. As politically central as Rome was it had been well evangelized (by the apostle Peter among others) and Paul preferred to go where the gospel had not yet been preached. So my aim is to evangelize where Christ has not been named, in order that I will not be building on someone else's foundation, (21) but, as it is written: “Those who had no report of Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.”

In order to do this Paul put these other less evangelized regions AHEAD of “important” Rome in his ministry priorities saying: *That is why I have been prevented many times from coming to you.*

It was only when the less reached provinces such as Galatia had been adequately evangelized that Paul could feel free to visit Rome. *But now I no longer have any work to do in these provinces, and I have strongly desired for many years to come to you (24) whenever I travel to Spain.*

Now one of the thorniest problems in missionary work is the question of “When is the job done so the missionary can go home or move elsewhere?” Does it take five years, fifty years or five hundred years?

In verse 23 Paul writes the astonishing phrase: “But now I **no longer have any work to do** in these provinces..” In other words “the job was done” for Paul in the vast area (about one thousand miles) “from Jerusalem, and all around to Illyricum” (see v. 19). Illyricum was a Roman province in the far north of Macedonia and corresponding to modern Albania, Croatia, Bosnia and Slovenia (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illyricum>) With the job done in these areas Paul could visit Rome on his way to Spain.

Romans was written about 58 AD, Paul's first missionary journey was 46-48 AD. So we are looking at a ten to twelve year period, and that without the aid of modern media. Were there no sinners left to convert, no pastors to train, no church problems to solve, no doctrinal controversies to sort out? For some reason Paul thought that the gospel had been “fully proclaimed” in these areas!

By 58 AD the gospel had been proclaimed to many, leaders like Timothy and Titus had been trained up and the main problems of local contextualization such as circumcision, meat offered to idols, the role of the Jewish law, and speaking in tongues had been solved, resolved and pronounced on. Now the local churches could take over the job and evangelize their local communities by being obedient to the gospel.

The local leadership understood the gospel and the Christian lifestyle and the power of the Holy Spirit and could be trusted to operate under God's guidance. Therefore Paul could leave them alone to do the job even though “savage wolves” would come in and cause problems (see Acts 20:17-38).

For Paul the missionary task was completed when the gospel had been clearly and unambiguously proclaimed in the area and trustworthy local leadership had been raised up who were capable of getting

God's guidance for themselves.

Paul did not wait until the local churches were perfect, or were financially sound, or were wonderful bible scholars. Once “faithful men (and women) who could teach others also” were raised up Paul moved on!

2 Timothy 2:2 HCSB *And what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, commit to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.*

Paul was not interested in maintaining his own position or importance, or being the great guru and solver of all problems, or in maintaining control. Control belonged to God alone!

Paul allowed the local Christians to run their churches with a high degree of autonomy and local flavor. The gospel was the same but the food, dress and certain aspects of the leadership styles may be very, very different.

The whole idea for Paul was to produce churches that were run by Jesus Christ and filled with love and the Holy Spirit. Jesus was to run the church, not man, and certainly not a corporation.

Paul did not produce a denominational handbook, or a Paulistic logo, or a centralized government with a multi-story head office and fierce executive assistants that kept people away from their “very important” bosses. Paul produced living, holy disciples who in turn produced other living, holy disciples.

So when should a missionary leave, and what does that say about what a missionary should be doing? A missionary should leave as soon as the gospel has been clearly proclaimed and the local leadership can stand on their own. This should not take “too long”. If Paul could do it in twelve years, perhaps we can say twenty to fifty years of missionary presence should be all that it takes. After that the missionary society should move to new areas where the gospel has not been as well proclaimed: *So my aim is to evangelize where Christ has not been named, in order that I will not be building on someone else's foundation, (21) but, as it is written: “Those who had no report of Him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.”*

Missionaries are there to bring the gospel to those who have not heard and should prioritize the unreached over the reached. This priority should cause them to avoid places where the gospel has been well proclaimed (such as most of South America) and focus on areas where it has hardly been heard at all – such as the Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist blocs. And the goal of the missions agency should be to proclaim the gospel and to make faithful Spirit-filled disciples who can teach others also.

Romans 15:25-29 HCSB Now, however, I am traveling to Jerusalem to serve the saints; (26) for Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution to the poor among the saints in Jerusalem. (27) Yes, they were pleased, and they are indebted to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to Jews in material needs. (28) So when I have finished this and safely delivered the funds to them, I will go by way of you to Spain. (29) But I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

The Hebrew Christians were experiencing a great famine, the one predicted by Agabus that came to pass during the reign of Claudius (Acts 11:28,29). So, out of brotherly love, the new Gentile Christians from Macedonia and Achaia were sending a large financial contribution (Acts 11:29). The gathering of this gift was expounded on at length in 1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:1-9:15. This helps us with our New Testament chronology as in 1 Corinthians the giving is explained, in 2 Corinthians there is an exhortation to complete it and later in Romans it is actually on its way to be delivered.

There is no explicit mention in Acts of the gift being gladly received and this has led some commentators maintain that it was refused by James and by the Jerusalem Church. But let us look at what Acts actually says:

Acts 21:15-26 HCSB After these days we got ready and went up to Jerusalem. (16) Some of the disciples from Caesarea also went with us and brought us to Mnason, a Cypriot and an early disciple, with whom we were to stay. (17) When we reached Jerusalem, the brothers welcomed us gladly. (18) The following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. (19) After greeting them, he related one by one what God did among the Gentiles through his ministry. (20) When they heard it, they glorified God and said, "You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews there are who have believed, and they are all zealous for the law. (21) But they have been told about you that you teach all the Jews who are among the Gentiles to abandon Moses, by telling them not to circumcise their children or to walk in our customs. (22) So what is to be done? They will certainly hear that you've come. (23) Therefore do what we tell you: We have four men who have obligated themselves with a vow. (24) Take these men, purify yourself along with them, and pay for them to get their heads shaved. Then everyone will know that what they were told about you amounts to nothing, but that you yourself are also careful about observing the law. (25) With regard to the Gentiles who have believed, we have written a letter containing our decision that they should keep themselves from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality." (26) Then the next day, Paul took the men, having purified himself along with them, and entered the temple, announcing the completion of the purification days when the offering for each of them would be made.

Even at this relatively late date the Jewish Christians were "all zealous for the Law" and were all circumcised and following the Jewish customs and the leaders of the Jerusalem Church all wanted Paul to demonstrate that he was still "careful about observing the law".

This must have created a great tension for Paul as we can clearly see from Romans, Galatians and many other places that Paul said the gospel abrogated the Jewish Law! At this point Paul must have realized his great error in going to Jerusalem despite the clear danger warnings of so many (Acts 21:10-14). Soon the situation becomes out of control with Jews from Asia who had heard Paul's teachings creating a riot and forcing his imprisonment (Acts 21:27-40).

We can see that James and the other apostles of the Jerusalem Church were still “under the Law” and thought that was proper for Jews such as Paul. They were also very cautious about having Paul in their midst but were glad that the Gentiles were believing in Jesus. But even so for them Christianity worked one way for Jews and another way for Gentiles, and the Jewish way was by implication the better way.

They asked that some of the money he brought be used to pay for four brothers who were taking a Jewish vow “under the Law” and by instructing Paul to join them, which he did. However what happened to the rest of the money?

My interpretation is that the offering was not warmly accepted and may even have been rejected and that this rejection of the goodwill and fellowship of the Gentiles marked the end of the authority of the Jerusalem church over the Gentile church. Here is how I got to that conclusion:

1. Acts never mentions the money being “gladly accepted” which, after the enormous effort put into gathering up this offering is quite unusual. The conversion of the Gentiles is accepted, but the gift itself is never mentioned.
2. The Jerusalem apostles could not accept Paul's gift without:
 - a) angering the local Jewish population
 - b) to some extent accepting Paul's theology and
 - c) being under some obligation to Gentiles for the gift (which was very hard for a traditional Jew).
3. However if they refused the gift they insulted the entire Gentile church. Given the intense local pressures it was easier for them to insult the Gentiles who were far away and who were viewed by many as culturally and spiritually inferior.
4. By this date Paul had written Galatians and Romans and clearly was no longer a Torah-observing Jewish Christian and had burned all his theological bridges with Torah-observant Jewish Christians. His constant refrain that we died to the Law through the work of Christ on the cross and that circumcision was of the heart not the body would have completely upset Torah-observant Jewish Christians who circumcised their children and kept Jewish customs (Acts 21:21). The Gentiles sent their gift through Paul and thus by implication they agreed with Paul's theology.
5. The gift was a koinoinian or “fellowship offering” and was meant to cement fellowship between Gentile Christians and their Jewish founding church. Refusal of a fellowship offering was effectively refusal of fellowship. The churches of Macedonia and Achaia had given very liberally and sacrificially to the Torah-observant Jewish Christians. To have this goodwill offering rejected would have naturally caused deep resentment.
6. By disowning Paul and not intervening to help him once the other Jews started protesting the Jerusalem church also disowned the churches that Paul led – that is the Gentile churches.
7. When at the end of the book of Acts Paul finally does arrive in Rome and speaks to the Jews there his words are bitter and angry. In fact the last words of Paul in Acts are a bitter denunciation of Jewish unbelief (Acts 28:25-29).
8. The Gentile Christian literature after this point, with the possible exception of the Didache, is relatively free of Jewish legalism. Any desire to follow after the Jerusalem based apostles seems to have completely evaporated.

9. Though Luke tactfully omits the refusal from the book of Acts others who were present such as Trophimus would have taken the word back to the Gentile church and Paul's imprisonment in Caesarea would not have gone unnoticed. The word would have got back and the damage would have been done. By the time Paul left prison two years later the Gentile church would have moved away from any Jerusalem based control.
10. After this the Jerusalem church becomes very Jewish and is led by relatives of Jesus until about 110 AD when all the Jews are expelled from Jerusalem. Towards the end it only accepted a Hebrew edition of the book of Matthew as the gospel. Its rejection of Paul's gift and of the validity of the faith of the Gentiles sent it into rapid and permanent decline.

What happened then? Paul's gift had a huge unintended consequence in splitting the early church. His attempt at reconciliation totally backfired. God even warned him not to go! Financial aid can seem a great idea but have terrible long term consequences! No matter how good or honorable our intentions or how deep our need for reconciliation and validation, we must follow the Holy Spirit.

Another spiritual lesson from this is seen today whenever denominational tradition or cultural pride causes group A to disdain group B. It is always those who reject fellowship, who are in turn rejected by God.

Romans 15:30-33

An Unanswered Prayer

Romans 15:30-33 MKJV *But I exhort you, brothers, for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and for the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in your prayers to God for me, (31) that I may be delivered from those disbelieving in Judea, and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted by the saints; (32) so that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed with you. (33) Now may the God of peace be with you all. Amen.*

If you go and do something, against the direction of the Holy Spirit, will prayer get you out of the mess that you create?

Paul is heading to Jerusalem, everyone is telling him not to and God even send the prophet Agabus who tells him that the Holy Spirit is telling him not to go and what the consequences would be:

Acts 21:9-14 MKJV *And there were four virgin daughters to this one, who prophesied. (10) And as we stayed more days, a certain prophet from Judea named Agabus came down. (11) And coming to us, and taking Paul's belt, and binding his hands and feet, he said, The Holy Spirit says these things: So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man whose belt this is, and will deliver him into the hands of the nations. (12) And when we heard these things, both we and those of the place begged him not to go up to Jerusalem. (13) Then Paul answered, What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus. (14) And he not being persuaded, we ceased, saying, The will of the Lord be done.*

Paul was clearly aware of these dangers even when he wrote Romans because he asks the Romans:

- a) *that I may be delivered from those disbelieving in Judea,*
- b) *and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted by the saints;*

Even at this point he was aware the unbelieving Jews might want to kill him and that the Jewish Christians might not accept his “service for the saints”. Paul is clearly aware of the tensions that surround this matter – yet he goes ahead and asks people to pray fervently.

Paul was gambling on prayer! He knew the risks and the consequences and the warnings of the Holy Spirit but was hoping the fervent prayers of himself and others would work in his favor. But they did not work in his favor and he was lucky to survive, spent two years in jail and quite possibly (if my reasoning in yesterdays devotional was correct) split Christendom down the middle!

Now I still hold Paul in high regard as a mighty apostle of God, but this was not his smartest moment. It was a mistake and it was a huge mistake! Scripture is honest enough to record it - and we can still learn from it. Here are some lessons I see in this:

1. God does not answers prayers, even from great saints, when they are being foolish and stubborn.
2. Don't pray to change human nature *en masse*. The answer to Paul's prayer would have required the entire Jewish leadership and Torah-observant Jewish Christians to do a 180 degree cultural about face – and that was a very tall order!
3. Most of the time wisdom is more important than courage and discretion is often the better part of valor. Paul's reply *For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus* was courageous but foolhardy.
4. No one is infallible. Even if you are right 99.5% of the time as Paul may have been there is that 0.5% when you can be plain wrong and you need to be aware of that.
5. Your “one mistake” can have huge consequences especially if you are a leader.
6. It is more important to listen to the Holy Spirit that to our own desires, or our own logic or to the imperatives of even our most strategic plans.

It is very common in missionary work to have a “Grand Plan” that is impractical but which we are “in love with” and desperately try to make work, and as we do so the mess just keeps getting worse and worse.

Why did Paul press on? Perhaps there a few understandable reasons:

1. Paul had accepted a large amount of money from people all over Asia Minor and would have lost a huge amount of “face” and credibility if he had not delivered it.
2. Paul possibly had a huge personal need for acceptance by the Jewish Christians and the Jewish people whom he loved so much (see Romans 9-11).
3. Paul had once been at the top of Jewish society and could not understand the rejection of him that was now complete.
4. Paul had a type A “driven” personality and was highly committed to achieving his objectives and completing his projects. Failure was not an option.

God is merciful and He did not strike Paul dead and in fact God saved him from the worst of the Jewish conspirators. God understood Paul's mistake and forgave him – yet He did send many warnings beforehand. Prayer while it is a mighty force, is no substitute for listening to God and obeying Him in all wisdom and humility - even if it means abandoning or greatly altering a “pet project”. Failure in the pet project is better than stubborn disobedience.

I, and many others in Christian service, can testify to the fact that we have foolishly gone ahead when God was saying “Whoa”! On such occasions the Grand Idea has become our “god” rather than the Lord. I take some comfort that even Paul made such a calamitous mistake. It is the mistake of one who strives and struggles and wrestles things to completion without giving in. Sometimes we should wake up, smell the coffee and acknowledge reality.

Romans 16:1-16, 21-23 HCSB I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a servant of the church in Cenchreae. (2) So you should welcome her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever matter she may require your help. For indeed she has been a benefactor of many--and of me also. (3) Give my greetings to Prisca and Aquila, my co-workers in Christ Jesus, (4) who risked their own necks for my life. Not only do I thank them, but so do all the Gentile churches. (5) Greet also the church that meets in their home. Greet my dear friend Epaphroditus, who is the first convert to Christ from Asia. (6) Greet Mary, who has worked very hard for you. (7) Greet Andronicus and Junia, my fellow countrymen and fellow prisoners. They are outstanding among the apostles, and they were also in Christ before me. (8) Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. (9) Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. (10) Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ. Greet those who belong to the household of Aristobulus. (11) Greet Herodion, my fellow countryman. Greet those who belong to the household of Narcissus who are in the Lord. (12) Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have worked hard in the Lord. Greet my dear friend Persis, who has worked very hard in the Lord. (13) Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord; also his mother--and mine. (14) Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them. (15) Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them. (16) Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ send you greetings.... Timothy, my co-worker, and Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, my fellow countrymen, greet you. (22) Tertius, who penned this epistle in the Lord, greet you. (23) Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the city treasurer, and our brother Quartus greet you.

These greetings may have been added later after the “Amen” that ends Romans 15 and include one from the amanuensis (scribe) Tertius (Romans 16:22). They seem to be written in a time when security of communication was not a concern. Such a list of names could have caused real trouble during the systematic persecutions of Nero or Domitian. The apostle John, who may have been the apostle to the underground church, is much more circumspect about what he put in writing (see 2 John & 3 John). This list of greetings is full of information about life in the early church. We find that:

1. This is almost a roll-call of Paul's ministry associates among the Gentiles and includes apostles, co-workers and the first convert from Asia (Epaphroditus)
2. The term “apostle” is applied outside the Twelve and Paul and now includes itinerant missionary workers such as Andronicus and Junia.
3. The large number of greetings, and the mention of people like Priscilla and Aquila who seem to be always on the move seems to indicate that Gentile Christianity was a huge, highly mobile network of believers spread right across the Roman world even at this early date.
4. There seem to be three groups of greetings: a) People from Asia who traveled with the epistle to Rome such as Phoebe which the Romans were to greet (v.1,2 and possibly v.3-7) b) Personal friends of Paul who were in Rome, who he was passing his personal greetings to (v. 8-15) and c) People living in Asia who were passing their greetings to the church in Rome such as Tertius and Gaius (v. 21-23). It is sometimes difficult to figure out just who is in which group!
5. The church met in homes (v.5 and possibly 10,11)
6. Women were in prominent roles, Phoebe was literally a “deacon” (v.1), Priscilla is mentioned before Aquila (v.3) the apostle Junia – is the feminine version of the name) so we may have a female apostle. Mary, Tryphen and Tryphosa are seen as “laborers” in the Lord.
7. Hard work and sacrificial service is highly commended (v.2,4,6,7,12)
8. The commended work is done “in Christ Jesus” and “in the Lord” indicating that it was done in obedience to Christ's commands. (v. 3,11,12)

9. The phrase “in Christ” and “in the Lord” is also used to indicate people who were believers. Those “in the Lord” were part of the church, called out from the world and from the surrounding culture and religions to a new and exciting way of being. (v. 7,8,10,11)
10. The church is asked to support Phoebe. Helping traveling Christian workers who were “worthy” seems to have been a practice of the early church. **3 John 1:5-8 HCSB** *Dear friend, you are showing your faith by whatever you do for the brothers, and this you are doing for strangers; (6) they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God, (7) since they set out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from pagans. (8) Therefore, we ought to support such men, so that we can be co-workers with the truth.*
11. The vast majority have Gentile names even though some are Paul's relatives or from a Jewish background. They may have been Jews from the Diaspora.
12. Paul's mother may still have been alive ! (v13) This gives an upper limit on Paul's age at this time. He is probably not much over 50.
13. Paul places a high value on relationship publicly noting who were his close friends and relatives.
14. The greetings seem to have been written from the area of Ephesus, as Timothy and local Ephesian officials such as Erastus and Gaius give greetings to the Roman church (v. 21-23)
15. From this we can deduce that Romans was written (or finally finished) in the vicinity of Ephesus just prior to Paul's trip to Jerusalem and around the time of Acts 20 and his farewell to the Ephesian elders at Miletus. Since Paul did not actually go to Ephesus on this particular journey (Acts 20:16,17) we can conclude the epistle was concluded by the scribe Tertius at the sea port of Miletus and sent to the Roman church from there via the hand of Phoebe and her companions.
16. The use of the scribe Tertius indicates that Paul's eye problem may have been acute (Galatians 4:15) as Paul could have easily written the letter himself. Some earlier epistles written Paul directly had very large handwriting (Galatians 6:16), by now he may have been unable to see close up at all, though he does appear to have some long distance vision and to be able to travel safely. Some put his eye problems down to his conversion experience that left him blind for three days (Acts 9:8-18)
17. Some seem to have suffered considerably for the gospel even at this stage with Andronicus and Junia having been imprisoned and Priscilla and Aquila having “risked their necks” for the church.
18. Andronicus and Junia were “outstanding among the apostles”. This comment implies a much larger apostolic group that they could stand out from. This group is obviously separate from the Twelve. So “the apostles” being referred to here are probably a large group of apostles who worked alongside Paul in the ministry to the Gentiles. This considerably expands our idea of what an “apostle” was.
19. This group was representative of the Gentile movement “all the Gentile church” (v.4) “all the churches of Christ” (v.16). Thus Romans may have been the theological manifesto for the Gentile church movement in early Christianity explaining salvation apart from the Law, salvation by faith alone, and life guided by the Spirit rather than the Torah (Romans 1-8) and how Gentile Christians should relate to both unsaved Jews (Romans 9-11) and the customs of Jewish Christians (Romans 14).
20. Greetings were to be with a “holy kiss” - the kiss on both cheeks common in the Middle East today. Church was not remote, cold or sedate but full of love and fellowship.

Thus we find a highly mobile, active, risk-taking, hard-working group of believers who really loved each other, cared for each other in practical ways, obeyed Christ and knew each other by name and were in and out of each other's homes and lives.

Romans 16:17-20, 24-27 HCSB Now I implore you, brothers, watch out for those who cause dissensions and pitfalls contrary to the doctrine you have learned. Avoid them; (18) for such people do not serve our Lord Christ but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting. (19) The report of your obedience has reached everyone. Therefore I rejoice over you. But I want you to be wise about what is good, yet innocent about what is evil. (20) The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you. ... (24) [The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.] (25) Now to Him who has power to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the sacred secret kept silent for long ages, (26) but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God, to advance the obedience of faith among all nations-- (27) to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ--to Him be the glory forever! Amen.

In these final verses Paul seems to be equipping the Roman church to deal with evil by:

- a) Warning them against divisive people (v.17)
- b) Helping them to discern the nature and tactics of divisive people (v.18)
- c) Encouraging the development of spiritual and moral discernment. (v.19)
- d) Reminding them that God is on their side and will help them (v.20,25)
- e) Calling them to a deeper knowledge of the gospel (v.25,26)
- f) Commending all obedience. (v.19,26)

Evil is the very last thing that Paul deals with in his great theological epistle. In fact it is almost an afterthought, an addendum! There is no paranoia here. Paul is so confident in Christ and in His salvation that only a few verses are needed on this issue.

Firstly Paul deals with divisive people and tells the Romans to simply avoid them. The Greek means “to turn away from, to shun”. 2 John puts it quite plainly:

2 John 1:9-11 MKJV *Everyone transgressing and not abiding in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ, he has both the Father and the Son. (10) If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house, nor speak a greeting to him. (11) For he who speaks a greeting to him is partaker of his evil deeds.*

In other words do not greet the Jehovah's Witnesses when they come to your door or imply in anyway that they are believers with whom you can have real fellowship! There is a fairly clear line of demarcation between true Christians and impostors and we must have nothing to do with those who peddle another gospel.

Paul tells us that the impostors: *do not serve our Lord Christ but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattering words they deceive the hearts of the unsuspecting.*

Some ministries clearly engage in flattery as a means of fund-raising and for the ensnarement of followers. They are living for themselves and not for Jesus Christ! When you see supposed “Christian leaders” living a lifestyle that indulges all the human appetites you need to be very careful. You are probably dealing with a fake. All true Christian ministries will have the “ring of truth and sincerity” about them and speak rather plainly.

Paul says that the Romans should develop spiritual discernment and knowledge so that they can “be wise in what is good and innocent in what is evil”. In other words it is OK to know all about the Bible and

nothing about pornography! There is a certain proper naivety among the saints. I do not watch programs like "Sex And The City" or horror movies or shows that have gross violence and cruelty and so on and so forth. The fact that I do not know how to lie in wait and strangle someone with by bare hands does not bother me! I have often been saved from sexual temptation by my naivety as I have not "got" what the person was referring to until days afterward - if ever at all!

I think it is right to fill our minds with righteousness and to leave them empty of lewdness and other forms of garbage.

Being wise in what is good is also a long process as God has made so much that is good and there is a great deal to learn! There is plenty to do in God's work without having to learn what is evil as well. We can learn the Truth and also good methods of ministry and wise ways of dealing with people and situations.

Paul then reminds them that God wins his victories through the Church. *The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.* Satan is crushed "under your feet" - that is under the feet of those who received and believed what Paul had written. Satan is of course crushed by Christ, but His Church has a part in it. Here is an analogy from the book of Joshua:

Joshua 10:24-26 HCSB *When they had brought the kings to him, Joshua summoned all the men of Israel and said to the military commanders who had accompanied him, "Come here and put your feet on the necks of these kings." So the commanders came forward and put their feet on their necks. (25) Joshua said to them, "Do not be afraid or discouraged. Be strong and courageous, for the LORD will do this to all the enemies you fight." (26) After this, Joshua struck them down and executed them. He hung their bodies on five trees and they were there until evening.*

Christ is analogous to Joshua and the church leaders to the commanders under Joshua. Joshua places the enemy kings (powers and principalities) under the dominion of church leaders who will defeat them and who are not to be afraid or discouraged.

Paul then launches into a final doxology that reminds the Romans that God has the power to greatly strengthen them for the purpose of obeying the gospel: (25) *Now to Him who has power to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the sacred secret kept silent for long ages, (26) but now revealed and made known through the prophetic Scriptures, according to the command of the eternal God, to advance the obedience of faith among all nations-- (27) to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ--to Him be the glory forever! Amen.*

"To Him be the glory forever!" - this is Paul's goal. To have an obedient and Spirit-filled Gentile church that understands the "sacred secret" of the gospel. While the sacred secret was hidden it was "always there" in the prophetic Scriptures that spoke of Christ and of the salvation of the Gentiles. Because of these prophecies the Gentile Christians could always be assured that their salvation was always in the plan of God.

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