

Attitudes in Christian Living

A Study of Romans 12

The article which follows is based on a study of Romans 12. The word “attitudes” refers to “a manner of acting, feeling, or thinking which shows our disposition and frame of mind.” In Romans 12, verses 1-8 describe our attitude toward serving God. Verses 9-16 describe our attitudes toward other Christians. Verses 17-21 describe our attitudes toward malicious enemies.

1. Our Attitude Toward Serving God

Paul had described a number of God’s mercies in the earlier chapters of the book of Romans. For example, in Romans 5:1, he says, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Once we were living in sin—afraid to live and afraid to die—but now, because of the Good News that Jesus paid the price for our sins, we have peace with God. We are acquitted—counted as if we had never sinned. God forgives. He justifies. And on the basis of an obedient faith, He gives us a clean slate before the Father. In light of these mercies, Paul says in Romans 12:1, we should present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God. And indeed this is only a reasonable response.

The word “present” means “to turn over” our bodies to the Lord and to put them at His disposal. The word “bodies” is a comprehensive term—including body, soul, and spirit. All that we have and all that we are should be turned over to God as a living sacrifice. And the word “sacrifice” (Romans 12:1) speaks of any offering made to God. It implies that the one who presents it, gives it entirely. He releases all claim to it. He submits it to God to be disposed of in a way that will promote His honor.

Thus Romans 12:1 is saying that by an act of surrender, we should place our total personalities at God’s disposal. This is a call for complete consecration to God. The Lord expects a total commitment. There must come a time when we say a great big “yes” to the will of God. The Lord does not want a mere token contribution—mouthing a few words about loyalty to Him. He expects a total commitment.

Verse 2 (of Romans 12) says that consecration to God is going to be followed by a new and different kind of daily living. We are not to be “conformed to this world” but to be “transformed by the renewing of the mind.”

The word “transform” means “a radical change.” The change will be like the change that takes place when a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. The reference is not so much to the initial act that takes place when one becomes a Christian, as to the daily spiritual growth which follows the new birth. The mind will be transformed as we submit to the Lord day after day. God will work in us an increasing likeness to the mind of Christ. The mind of the committed child of God will be transformed.

The words “be not conformed” mean “don’t pattern after.” The outward conduct of one who is being transformed will not pattern after the world system. The word “conform” is a broad word that refers to our actions, words, and whole manner of life. It refers to the way one drives an automobile (watches the

speed limit); it speaks of one's attitudes toward sickness and death (doesn't "go to pieces"); it includes the kinds of clothes one wears (concerned about modesty, simplicity, and economy). The word "conform" speaks of that which is outward and visible. The text literally says, "Do not conform **outwardly** to the standards of this world." And so the dedicated Christian does not strain every nerve to do as the world does, to follow the latest fashions, and to keep up with the Joneses. Instead, he makes a deliberate attempt to practice a simple lifestyle and to avoid the immodest, the luxurious, and the vanities of this world system.

The instruction, "Be not conformed to this world"—does not imply that we should head for the nearest cave and become hermits, but we are to no longer think, act, and plan in the same ways that our unsaved neighbors do. Instead—our lives are to be reconstructed along the lines described in, and mandated in, the New Testament. The Christian faith does not take us out of the world, but it loosens us from a keen attachment to the world.

In verses 3 through 8 (of Romans 12), we learn that serving the Lord effectively can only occur when we come to realize that the church is a Body that is made up of many individual members. Members of the Body have differing gifts, but each gift is necessary if the Body is going to function properly. None of us can be "Christians" in isolation. We function along with other Christians. This calls for an honest evaluation of our own gifts, and also for faithful cooperation with other members of the Body.

Verse 3 (of Romans 12) warns against thinking too highly of ourselves, but at the same time, cautions that we do not think too meanly of ourselves either. There is something like self-respect. It is hard to define, but there is a fine line between self-respect and pride. If we have no self-respect, we soon become careless and slipshod, but we must guard against pride—putting ourselves on a pedestal above others.

In verses 4-8 (of Romans 12), we are told that each member has a spiritual gift, and that each gift is necessary to the proper functioning of Christ's Body. No one should think he can do everything; no one should say, "I can't do anything." The Apostle Paul is speaking to a local church, and he says that God has bestowed the various gifts so that the local body can grow in a balanced way.

Some have the gift of **prophecy**. This is a reference to preaching, speaking in public, declaring the message of God to fellow human beings.

Others have the gift of **teaching**. Teaching is the ability to explain and to apply the Scriptures—to make them clear and understandable to others.

Some have the gift of **exhorting**. Exhorting is the ability to encourage and admonish; to speak words of counsel and wisdom.

God gives some the gift of **giving**. All are to give of their material substance, but God gives some the honest ability to make money in almost every endeavor they engage in, and portions of that money should be used to help those who are in need.

Others are given the gift of **ruling**. This speaks of the gift of administration—the ability to moderate a meeting so that everything is organized and done decently and in order.

The final gift mentioned in Romans 12 is that of **showing mercy**. The Greek word used here literally means “sick visitor.” It is the gift that enables people to bring brightness and cheerfulness into the sick room.

These then have been the gifts which God in His mercy bestows upon His people. We belong to each other; we minister to each other; we need each other.

The first eight verses of Romans 12 speak about our attitude toward serving God. The key thought in this passage focuses on **commitment**. We are to present our bodies, to shun conformity to the world, and to find our place by doing our work and using our gifts for the welfare of others in the Christian family.

2. Our Attitude Toward Other Christians

Our relationship with other Christians can be described with the word **love**. Love is the anxious desire for the welfare of others.

Verse 9 (of Romans 12) says that our love should be “without dissimulation”—that is, it must be genuine and without hypocrisy. It is easy to feign love; to speak pleasant words to the face, but at the same time not really seek the best for the other person. In the verses that follow, we are shown that real genuine love expresses itself in a number of ways.

Verse 10 says that genuine love is **affectionate**. People in this world are accustomed to harsh dealings with each other. They take unfair advantage; they lose tempers; they get angry with each other. The Christian, by way of contrast, possesses a love that is openhearted and kind and thoughtful. This love was expressed outwardly in the early church by the holy kiss. When Paul prayed with the elders at Miletus, the Bible says that they all wept much, and embraced Paul, and kissed him (Acts 20:37). The Christians in the early church demonstrated a genuine love that was affectionate.

Verse 11 says that genuine love is **enthusiastic**. The word “business” (in Romans 12:11) speaks of spiritual activity. Our work in the church should be characterized by zeal and energy and fervency. We must never “just drag along” in the Lord’s work (as if there is nothing to be excited about). Apollos was a fervent preacher (Acts 18:25). James speaks of fervent prayer (James 5:16). Peter recommends fervent love (1 Peter 1:22). Our work in God’s service should be done with a great deal of enthusiasm.

Verse 12 says that genuine love is **hopeful**. Christian hope is not mere wishful thinking. It is not a blind desire to have something happen. It is not a mere optimistic temperament—the ability to look at the bright side of everything. Hope is the firm conviction that God’s promises will indeed materialize. Christians are happy people because of their hope—hope related to Christ’s coming, to the resurrection of the body, and to our eternal home in Heaven. And because the Christian is hopeful, he can be patient when things go wrong. He knows that when trials come, God is behind the scenes working things out for his welfare. Thus we are joyful when happy experiences come into our lives, and we are steadfast when illness and trouble comes.

Verse 12 says that genuine love is **prayerful**. We should strive to be consistent in prayer, keeping ourselves so near to God that we can whisper to Him at any time. Just as we get up in the morning, usually eat three meals a day, and go to bed at night, so prayer should be the established routine of our lives. The secret of the prophet Daniel's good and consistent life, lay in his habits of regular daily prayer. He prayed lovingly—with his face toward the holy city of Jerusalem. He prayed regularly—three times a day (even in the midst of the demands of his office). He prayed humbly—by bending his knees before God. He prayed praisefully—by giving thanks to the Lord even in the midst of threats to his life. Maintaining a regular and consistent prayer life will make us more nearly the kinds of persons God wants us to be.

Verse 13 says that genuine love is **helpful**. The Christian shares his resources with those who are in need. We are especially to be given to hospitality—receiving visitors kindly and generously in our homes. In the early church, Christians traveled much—sometimes as evangelists; sometimes to escape persecution; and sometimes on business assignments. The doors of Christian homes were open to other believers who were traveling. Peter was lodging with Simon the tanner (Acts 10:6). Paul lodged with Mnason of Cyprus (Acts 21:16). The inns in New Testament times were expensive, and had become centers of evil practices, and so each Christian home became “an inn” to shelter other believers who were traveling.

Verse 14 says that genuine love is **forgiving**. The real test of our Christian faith, is our attitude toward those who misuse us. To “bless those who persecute us” is literally “to pray the blessings of God upon our persecutors”—just as Jesus did when He hung on the Cross. Jesus looked down on the blood-spattered hands of those who mocked Him, and had nailed Him to the cross—and said, “Father, forgive them.” We will look at the concept of forgiveness again when we examine the very last verses of Romans 12.

Verse 15 says that real love is **sympathetic**. We are instructed to share the joys of those who are glad as well as the sorrows of those who are sad. Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus, and He brought joy to a group that had gathered for a wedding. When we hear of the health and happiness and prosperity of another, we should rejoice with him in his success. In the same way, when our Christian friends are passing through times of weeping, we should weep with them. John Fawcett expresses the truth of this passage on sympathy very well when he says, “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear; and often for each other flows, the sympathizing tear.”

Verse 16 says that genuine love is **condescending**. The Lord, in this passage, reminds us to be a companion of the humble and to associate with those of lowly estate. Jesus ministered to common people, and they heard Him gladly (Mark 12:37). When we think that we must associate only with the elite, and with the upper classes in society, we have departed from God's ideal for ministry to others. In Colossians 3:11 we are told that Christ is equally available to all persons—Greek and Jew, those who are in jail and those who are free, those who are civilized and those who are uncouth and barbarian in nature. Jesus died for all, and we are to seek to reach all for Him.

Love is the key to the second section of Romans 12. Genuine love leads to good relationships with other Christians. Love is the quality that enables all members to function in a healthy and harmonious way.

3. Our Attitude Toward Malicious Enemies

The Christian can expect to have enemies. Not everyone is going to be friendly toward us. Jesus says that “If the world hate you, you know that it hated me before it hated you” (John 15:18). Not everyone is going to be friendly toward us. There are three admonitions given in Romans 12 to help us relate properly to enemies.

Verse 17 says **we should carefully avoid retaliation**. When someone does an evil deed that is directed toward us, we must not retaliate with a similar deed. We are not to do to others as they do to us, but rather, we are to do to others as we **would have them** do to us. Retaliation is paying back injury for injury. It is totally opposed to the mind of Christ, and thus it is out of the question for God’s people to use retaliation as a means of response to those who injure us. Jesus says that instead—we should turn the other cheek, go the second mile, and show mercy toward others.

Verse 18 says that **we should try and preserve peace**. In essence, God says, “Don’t let any stone unturned in your efforts to try and make peace.” We should seek every means possible to maintain harmony with others. The other party may not yield, but we must do everything possible from our side to maintain harmony and to live peaceably with all persons. Try and answer angry people in a gentle way. Try and make peaceful settlement even at personal sacrifice, rather than take matters to court. Proverbs 15:1 says that a soft answer turns away wrath. And 1 Corinthians 6:7 says that if conflicts cannot be settled by the mediation work of other Christians, we should “take wrong” and even allow ourselves “to be defrauded”—rather than go to the law courts of the world to try and settle disputes.

Verses 19-21 says that **we should not take revenge**. When someone harms us, the natural reaction is to take things into our own hands, and to try and get even. When someone disagrees with what we’ve said; when the neighbor’s dog wrecks our flower bed; when someone cuts us off while driving on the highway—the old Adam boils up inside us—and we wonder how we can even the score. God says, “Avenge not yourselves; don’t take matters into your own hands; rather, give place unto wrath. Let God’s wrath operate.” The Christian must not play God and try to avenge himself. Returning evil for evil, or good for good—is the way most people live. The Christian does not live that way! We are to live on a higher level—**and return good for evil**.

Verse 20 (of Romans 12) says that the way to move a person’s heart is to treat him with kindness, and not with revenge. Kindness will make a deep impression on the enemy. It will make him feel a burning sense of shame (“coals of fire on his head”). And some day if we treat him kindly he might be convicted of the wrong in his conduct, and perhaps will even turn to God in repentance.

At the Berlin Congress on Evangelism in the 1960s, two of the Auca Indians from Ecuador were present. The Aucas were a crude people who murdered five missionaries in December, 1956. One of the missionaries who was killed—was Jim Elliot. Elisabeth Elliot (Jim’s widowed wife) was at the Berlin Congress, and so was Quemo, one of the Aucas who had killed her husband.

Elisabeth Elliot (along with some other missionaries) had been able in the years after 1956 to go to the Aucas, and live among them, and share the Gospel with the tribe of people. Some were converted; a few became preachers of the Word. It was also during the time when Elisabeth had gone back to the Aucas, that her daughter Valerie accepted Christ as her Savior. Now a number of years had passed.

From the platform of the Berlin Congress Assembly, Elisabeth Elliot was asked to introduce Quemo, the native Auca who was to give a brief testimony. In the introduction, she said: "Quemo is the man who killed my husband; he is also the man who baptized our daughter into the church of Christ." And then Quemo, through an interpreter, gave a testimony before the assembly of people.

Romans 12 is a survey of attitudes by which Christian people should live. An **attitude** is a manner of acting, feeling, or thinking—which shows our disposition and our frame of mind. Our attitude toward serving God (verses 1-8) should be one of deep dedication. Our attitude toward fellow Christians (verses 9-16) should be marked by genuine love. And our attitude toward malicious enemies (verses 17-21) should be characterized by unusual kindness. May God help us to translate into action the instructions which are given to us in Romans 12.

-Harold S. Martin

BIBLE HELPS

Robert Lehigh, Editor

PO Box 391

Hanover, PA 17331

United States of America