



No 8

Being a good neighbour

Romans 12 verses 14 to 21

Romans is often thought of as Paul's heavyweight theological tome. But, as Paul so often does, he builds his message from the solid base of what Christians believe to some very practical material. Just take a look at verse 12 onwards – a series of punchy one phrase comments about how we should treat other people. Most people who read them shudder at the thought of obeying them. Why not just read them out and see how many of them you carry out?

Love must be sincere

Hate what is evil, cling to what is good

Be devoted to one another in brotherly love

Honour one another above yourselves

Never be lacking in zeal but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction.

Paul is being practical. Based on what he has taught us earlier in Romans about the salvation God has given us through the death of His son, this is how we should respond to 'such a great salvation'.

Paul then launches into how we should deal with people who are not attractive to us. This is tough but how do we work this out. Paul's commands in Romans are simply a repeat of Jesus' clear commands on this issue. (Matt 5:44, Luke 6:27 to 28)

How do we 'bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse?'

Is this asking too much?

Is revenge a natural instinct?

Would we sometimes say words like this through gritted teeth? – we say it but we don't mean it.

Paul's next challenge sounds a little easier. He calls on us to turn the other cheek, displaying a love for others that goes far beyond the normal boundaries of normal human love. But it demands thinking of the needs of others before your own mood or feelings.

If a friend has had something wonderful happen to them, is it hard to share their joy when your life is a struggle.

Similarly, is it hard to feel empathetic towards a sad person when your own life is full of joy?

Living in 'harmony' (v16) is easy to say but not always easy to do. All of us will have known times where pride can surface in our behaviour. And although we would never admit it, not associating with people of lower position has probably happened. Perhaps some of us have known what it means to be conceited. We might even find we do these things and only then realise what has crept into our behaviour.

How do we keep these negative traits under control?

What is the antidote to self-centredness?

This passage is a complete statement about how Christians should live. Some phrases are about things an individual should try to work out. But the New Testament assumes that the Christian life will be lived in community. So, we need help when relationships within our community come under strain. Repaying evil

for evil is essentially about revenge – when we harbour wrong thoughts about another believer. ‘Doing what is right in the eyes of everyone’ helps us to realise it is not just our actions but how our actions will be seen that is important. We may feel we have every reason to be angry with someone but that anger may be seen as revenge and we shouldn’t do it.

It may be helpful to discuss times where we have found it very easy to seek revenge.

Does this mean we should never deal with our differences?

Should our differences be buried?

Are we happy to let God do the anger bit? (v19)

Paul’s clinching statement is perhaps the most challenging. A person you regard as an enemy should be given food or drink if they have a need. The ‘heaping burning coals on their head’ is a difficult statement. It implies that responding to evil with good makes the recipient ashamed of their actions and they will seek reconciliation with the Lord. So, responding to evil with good puts you in a strong position and encourages the other person to think again.

How much of a struggle is it to overcome evil with good

You feel hurt or damaged by another’s actions so you show them that you love and care for them – is this realistic?

How much difference would this make to our Christian communities if we all followed this pattern?

At one level this is a very simple series of statements.

Natural human instincts do not always follow Paul’s teaching

Sometimes passages like this can be very discouraging

We feel the standard is too high

If we try to get every one right every day we live we will certainly fail

So why not read the passage through one more time

Then read it again

Stop at the bit you find the most challenging

Ask God to give you the strength and will to work on that area