

MINI BIBLE COLLEGE

BOOKLET Thirty-Two

THE BOOK OF ROMANS

VERSE BY VERSE

(PART 4)

Romans 12 - 16

This is the fourth and last booklet in a series that provide notes for those who have heard our radio programs that teach the letter of Paul to the Romans, verse-by-verse. If you would like to study or teach these insights into the theological masterpiece of Paul to the Romans, for continuity you should have the first three booklets in this series. If you will contact us we will send you the booklets you do not have.

Chapter One

"So What?"

(12:1-21)

I begin my commentary on the twelfth chapter of this letter by emphasizing the fact that the call for faith and commitment with which this chapter begins must never be separated from the magnificent benediction with which Paul concluded the eleventh chapter. When that benediction is understood, we realize that these six verses absolutely must be considered together:

"Oh, the depth of the riches, the wisdom and the knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has become His counselor? Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him? For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to Him be glory forever. Amen.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." (11:33-12:2)

When Paul writes the word "therefore" at the beginning of the first verse of this twelfth chapter, we should realize there is a sense in which he is about to apply everything he has taught the Romans - and you and me - since he began this inspired theological presentation in the seventeenth verse of the first chapter of this letter. He is more specifically challenging us to reflect back to the profound teaching he began with the fourteenth verse of the eighth chapter, and concluded with that spiritually eloquent benediction at the end of Chapter 11.

At the conclusion of the eleventh chapter, as Paul finishes writing that beautiful benediction, it is almost as if he imagines his readers asking him questions again. Their question this time is: "So what does all this mean to me, Paul?" He then writes that word "therefore" and begins the last chapters of this letter, which are filled with devotional and intensely practical applications to all the marvelous truth he has presented in these first eleven chapters.

As we think with Paul all the way through the first eleven chapters of this letter, there are three questions we must ask and answer. Those questions are: "What did he say? What did he mean?" And we must ask ourselves, "What does all this mean to me?"

All the letters of Paul can be divided into two sections: those chapters where he is teaching and the chapters where he is applying what he is teaching. His letter to the Ephesians is evenly divided with three chapters of teaching and three of application. In this letter, the first eleven chapters are teaching chapters and the last five chapters are chapters filled with applications. The sixteenth chapter is filled with greetings, which many readers ignore, but we will see that chapter is also filled with applications that are rooted in the

teaching section of this letter. Paul knew that truth without application is useless and he now begins to tell and show us how to live out these deep eternal truths in our daily lives.

This is Paul's theological masterpiece and the most profound and comprehensive theological statement of what the New Testament Church believed. These last chapters are the longest, the most devotional and the most practical application chapters in all the writings of this man who wrote nearly half the New Testament.

His call to commitment, which follows this benediction, demands the "reasonable service" of an unconditional surrender to God. "Reasonable service" can be translated "intelligent worship". His last words before he began this call to commitment were that God is the source of all things, He is the power behind all things, and the glory of God is the purpose for all things. In these first two application verses Paul calls for total and unconditional surrender to God. This is only reasonable, or intelligent worship when we realize that the perfect knowledge and wisdom of God are being expressed in all that Paul has written in this letter.

These first two verses can also be considered a prescription for finding and doing the will of God for our lives. One of the greatest questions God asks us in the Bible is: "Who are you?" (Genesis 27:32-34; John 1:22) This question implies that there is somebody we are designed to be. The very first words God speaks to fallen man are questions. The first question is "Where are you?" The second question is, "Who told you?"

These questions imply that there is somebody we are designed to be. We are always somewhere relative to that personal identity, and if we are listening, God is telling us where we should be. Paul is showing us how to be who and where

we are designed to be when he teaches several steps that show us how to find and experience the good, acceptable and perfect will of God for our lives.

The question a pastor is asked more than any other question is, "Pastor, how can I know the will of God for my life?" The biggest obstacle to knowing the will of God for our life is not the fact that it is difficult to know the will of God. The greatest obstacle to knowing the will of God is not the will of God but our own will. That is why the first step in this prescription for finding and doing the will of God is a total commitment of our will and the deliberate commitment to be a living sacrifice for God as we follow our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament prescribed animal sacrifices for the sins of the people of God. All those sacrifices were represented and fulfilled by the "Lamb of God" John the Baptist introduced when Jesus began His ministry in this world (John 1:29). Animal sacrifices were all dead sacrifices. Paul uses the interesting metaphor of "a living sacrifice" as he spells out the meaning of the unconditional surrender in his call to commitment. This metaphor means that Paul is not challenging believers to be willing to die for Christ. He is challenging us to live for Christ - all day long every day - living sacrifices for Christ. This is his first prescription for finding and proving the will of God for our lives.

We are challenged to consider the mercy of God and then "present" ourselves as living sacrifices. This word in the original language means to yield, or throw our hands up and surrender to God. The mercy of God withholds from us what we deserve. Since Paul told us in the first chapter that the Gospel reveals the wrath of God against all our ungodliness and unrighteousness (1:18), we should thank God for withholding from us what we deserve. Making the mercy of God the motivation for

our unconditional surrender to God is a subtle reference to the thought in his benediction that God does not owe anybody anything.

He describes this life style as "holy," which means, "That which belongs to God." When we own something, we can use it anytime and anyway we like. When we are holy, we are literally the possession of God, which He can use anytime, anywhere and anyway He chooses. When we are holy, unconditionally surrendered, living sacrifices for Christ, we are then living the only life that is acceptable to God.

As we learned in the fifth chapter, if it cost God the life of His Son to declare us righteous, we simply must find that access, by faith, into the grace that makes it possible for us to live right. In the spirit of that same inspired logic, Paul calls for the intelligent worship of unconditional surrender and our offering ourselves to God as living sacrifices all day long, every day.

To the Jew, the concepts of worship and sacrifice were inseparable. When Abraham was about to climb Mount Moriah and offer to God the sacrifice of his son Isaac, he said to the servants who traveled there with him, "Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you." (Genesis 22:5) This gives us two remarkable insights into the faith of Abraham. He knew that he and his son would both return from that mountain. However, the most remarkable word Abraham said to his servants was the way he used the word "worship". He said that he and his son were going to "worship" and he was going to sacrifice his son on that mountain. He called sacrificing his son "worship".

When a woman worshipped Jesus by pouring expensive perfume on His feet, which cost the equivalent of one year's wages, Judas complained that this money could have been given to the

poor. Jesus defended her act of costly worship because to our Lord, worship and sacrifice are one concept (John 12:3-8).

The word "worship" can be paraphrased as "worth" or "value". Paul began that benediction: "Oh, the depth of the riches ... of God." A question raised by Paul's benediction is: "What is God worth?" We answer that question every time we worship. We especially answer that question when we express the reasonable service, or intelligent worship of applying this prescription of Paul for finding and living out the will of God for our lives.

In summary, consider a paraphrase of these two verses, which makes their meaning very clear: "With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give Him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to Him and acceptable by Him. Do not let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the Plan of God for you is good, meets all His demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity." (12:1, 2 J. B. Phillips)

The second part of this prescription of Paul for knowing the will of God focuses the way we relate to the world in which we live for Christ. Paul warns that we are not to be conformed to this world. The translation quoted above warns that the world is trying to squeeze us into its own mould. We are challenged to resist that pressure from the world culture in which we live.

A shallow interpretation and application of the second part of this prescription is to prohibit believers from doing some of the worldly things they did before they became believers. This is an important dimension of living right, but Paul means

something deeper than these worldly habits that were part of our lives before we met Christ.

The life style that embraces and lives by the materialistic values and priorities of the world culture in which we live is on the heart of Paul as he writes this warning. In his letter to the Philippians, he describes the values revolution and the before and after change in his priorities because he met Christ. He essentially wrote: "How changed are my ambitions!" or, "How changed are my values!" (Philippians 3:7-11 J. B. Phillips)

The third part of Paul's prescription for proving in practice that the plan of God for our lives is good and meets all His demands is his exhortation to experience that transformation that completely renews our minds. In summary, his prescription for discovering and living out the perfect will of God for our lives is to be committed in our wills, conformed to His values and the image of His Son, and to be converted in our minds. Then we will find the answer to that question Paul asked Jesus when he met Him: "Lord, what will you have me to do?" (Acts 9:6)

The apostle has not changed the subject when he moves directly into a discussion of spiritual gifts. His inspired logic is that if we will discover our spiritual gifts and surrender them to God, that spiritual discipline will lead us into the heart of His good, acceptable and perfect will for our lives. He writes: "For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith. For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them." (3-6)

In his opening statement, Paul makes it clear that he is instructing us to apply all the teaching of this letter, first of all, to ourselves. When he writes "... to everyone who is among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think," he raises this question: "As believers, how should we think of ourselves?" What does the Bible tell us about the right way to think about ourselves?

A delegation was sent out into the wilderness to ask John the Baptist the question, "What do you say about yourself?" (John 1:22) According to Jesus this man was the greatest man ever born (Luke 7:28; Matthew 11:11). We see a key to his greatness in the way he answered that question. Essentially, he replied that he was who, what and where the will of God placed him to be. In other words, he was doing the good, acceptable and perfect will of God for his life. I wonder, how do you answer that question? What do you say about yourself? It is very important that we have the right answers to that question.

We should not confuse the biblical concept of "self" with what the Bible refers to as "the flesh". According to one biblical scholar the flesh is "human nature unaided by God". Another scholar I respect wrote: "The flesh can drive you and enslave you, but the 'you' the flesh drives and enslaves is not the flesh." When Paul uses the word "self" he does not mean the same thing as when he uses terms like, "the flesh", "the old man," or "the old nature."

If you do a word study in the entire New Testament of the Greek words which are translated as "self", in all its forms, such as himself, herself, themselves, etc. you will see that Jesus and Paul use these words frequently, but never casually or lightly. I have made such a study, but before I summarize the results of my study, it is very important to have a working

definition of precisely what is meant when Paul or others in the New Testament use this word "self".

The concept that is translated as "self" in the New Testament means: "The uniqueness created and given by God, the individuality of any given person which makes them distinct from every other living person." This word in all its forms emphasizes the sacredness of individuality. The Bible teaches consistently that God throws the mold away every time He creates a human being. While holding that working definition of your self in perspective, consider some examples of the way this concept is used in the teachings of Jesus and the Apostle Paul.

In His parable about a prodigal son, when the consequences of the prodigal ways of the lost son lead to a hog pen, the son realizes that he is not a hog. He may be in a hog pen and he may wish he could eat the food he is feeding the hogs, but he is not a hog; he is a son and he does not belong in a hog pen! He belongs in his father's house and he makes the decision to leave the hog pen and return to his father and his father's house. Jesus describes that decision of the prodigal son this way: "He came to himself." (Luke 15:17) He decided to return to his father's house and love where he would be the person he was born to be.

The Apostle Paul writes a letter to Timothy in which he tells his son in the faith how to counsel a difficult person. He refers to Timothy as "the servant of the Lord." Paul labels the problem of the difficult person when he declares that such a person is "opposing himself". According to Paul, the objective in this counseling is that Timothy might be an instrument through which this person might "recover himself" out of the snare of the devil. The hard reality of this difficult person's problem is that he has been taken captive by the evil one (2 Timothy 2:23-26).

Paul instructs Timothy to earn and maintain a hearing with this one who is opposing himself by experiencing three fruit of the Spirit: meekness, gentleness and patience. Timothy will then have the opportunity to instruct this person who is opposing himself. If God gives them the Spirit of repentance, and they acknowledge the truth Timothy has placed before them, they will recover themselves out of the snare of the evil one who has taken them captive at his will. The importance of this fascinating instruction about counseling is the way Paul describes the problem person as opposing and then recovering himself.

Paul confronts the Corinthians for thinking of themselves incorrectly. They are "measuring themselves by themselves" and they are "comparing themselves among themselves". According to Paul, when they think of themselves in these two ways, they are unwise (2 Corinthians 10:12). We should not measure ourselves by ourselves, and we should not compare ourselves with others. We will not discover the uniqueness or individuality God has planned for us by comparing ourselves with what He has planned for others.

Paul agrees with Jesus when he writes that we should not compare ourselves with others. In the last chapter of the Gospel of John, Jesus told Peter how he was going to die for His Lord. If the church tradition about the death of Peter is accurate, this means Jesus told Peter he was going to be crucified upside down. Peter responded to this news by pointing with his thumb over his shoulder to John and asked the Lord, "What about him?" Jesus responded by essentially telling Peter that His plan for John was none of Peter's business (John 21:21, 22).

If it is wrong for us to measure ourselves by ourselves, or to compare ourselves with others, how should we measure

ourselves? Paul answers that question when he challenges Timothy to take heed to himself and to the Scriptures (1 Timothy 4:16). These Greek words mean that Timothy is to keep a watchful eye on himself. He is to continuously measure himself by the Word of God. This instruction comes with a great promise. If Timothy will hold his life up to the Scriptures, and continuously apply the Scriptures to his life, he will experience salvation and lead others to salvation.

Jesus teaches that we should love God with all our hearts and love our neighbors as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:35-40). Our Lord was essentially teaching that we should love God completely, we should love our neighbor unconditionally and we should love ourselves correctly. This does not mean that we love ourselves so much that every time we pass a mirror we should stop and have our devotions! It simply means that we should love what God loves. God loves us unconditionally and we should love the new creation we have become and are becoming as we walk with Christ.

Paul is thinking in this same context when he instructs the Corinthians and you and me to " ... commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God (2 Corinthians 4:2). When people see what Christ has done in making something beautiful of our lives they are beholding the creative workmanship of God (Ephesians 2:10). As we bear witness to that miracle we should say, in effect, "What do you think of what Jesus has done for me? Is this not a miracle?"

Jesus teaches that we are to deny ourselves. However, in the context of His self-denial teaching, He also teaches that if we gain the whole world and lose ourselves we have made a very foolish bargain. His clear teaching is that whatever we do, we should never lose ourselves, or exchange anything for ourselves (Luke 9:23-25). He also asked the question, "What will a man

give in exchange for himself?" One answer in the Bible is "a bowl of soup!" When Esau sells his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of soup we have an Old Testament illustration of this teaching of Jesus. (Genesis 25:29-34)

Those are a few examples of how the Scriptures tell us we should think about ourselves. Paul begins his instruction about how we should think of ourselves by writing that the grace of God has equipped him to share some insights with us into the spiritual gifts the risen, living Christ gives to His people through the Holy Spirit. He consistently claims, "By the grace of God I am what I am" (1 Corinthians 15:10). As I have observed, Paul gives this teaching about spiritual gifts here because he believes our spiritual gifts will lead us to the good, acceptable and perfect will of God for our lives. Unconditional surrender, the renewal of our minds through transformation, holy living and the discovery of our spiritual gifts will lead us to the place where we will have the right answers to those life-defining questions of God, which will show us who and where our God wants us to be.

According to Paul, spiritual gifts are an expression of the grace of God. Consistent with our definition of "self," and with what he wrote about how we should think about ourselves, these gifts differ by the grace of God. When the believers in a church are gifted, their gifts will be different and will make them differ from one another. When we observe a Spirit controlled, or gifted church, we will be impressed with the amazing diversity of the individual members of that church.

God knows that if two of us were exactly alike, one of us would be unnecessary. He is, therefore, committed to the uniqueness, and the individuality of every believer, which makes them distinct from every other believer - and every one of us necessary. Nobody has all these spiritual gifts. We are

therefore incomplete without the believer(s) with the spiritual gift(s) we do not have.

Paul also emphasizes the concept of oneness, or unity as he describes the way spiritual gifts are given to a local church (I Corinthians 12). Since these two principles of diversity and oneness seem to be opposite, and another one of those either/or propositions, Paul uses the metaphor of a body to describe the nature and function of gifts at work in the local church.

The great apostle who planted the New Testament Church in this world shares these truths more completely in some of his other letters. He gives the teaching about spiritual gifts in this context because he believes they help us know how we should think about ourselves, and they will lead us into the will of God for our lives. He gives us some examples of spiritual gifts as he writes: "If prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness." (6-8)

In these two verses he gives seven examples of spiritual gifts. To prophesy means to speak for God or to be a person through whom God speaks. The word is a compound word which has two meanings: "to stand before" and "to make shine." Although prophets did often receive special revelations and predict future events, they were more than "spiritual weathermen", telling what was about to happen.

It is not often appreciated that prophets were primarily the great preachers of the Old Testament period of Hebrew history. Jesus proclaimed that John the Baptist was the greatest prophet who ever lived. He came preaching the sermons of Isaiah. I am convinced that the spiritual gift of prophecy is primarily the gift of proclaiming the Word of God.

Exhortation is part of this gift pattern because those who prophesy often exhort believers to obey and apply the Word of God they have spoken. In a broader sense, any time God speaks through us to another person, we are exercising the gift of prophecy.

Ministry is a comprehensive gift pattern that may relate prophecy to other gifts like teaching. We read that the apostles "Gave themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word." (Acts 6:4) The ministry of the Word could be in the context of preaching, teaching, or the ministry of the Word to one individual. That could include what we call counseling today. Obviously, these gifts intersect and work in patterns. We should not think in terms of what our spiritual gift is, but rather what our cluster of spiritual gifts might be.

Spiritual gift patterns are also profiled in his letters to the Corinthians and the Church in Ephesus (1 Corinthians 12:4-11; Ephesians 4:11-13). Peter gives some examples of spiritual gifts in his first letter (1 Peter 4:10, 11). When spiritual gifts are referenced in this way in the New Testament, the lists are not intended to be exhaustive, but merely some examples of how spiritual gifts look, can be identified and are intended to function in a local church. If you study all the Scriptures that list spiritual gifts, approximately twenty-one different gifts are profiled in this way.

There are many spiritual gifts in the lives of believers in our churches that are not listed in the New Testament. Consider the many gifts that involve musical talent, which God uses dynamically as He moves people to faith, worship and fruitful service. Spiritual gifts often come in clusters. For example, the person with the gift of teaching would also have the gifts of knowledge and wisdom. As I have observed, exhortation is clustered with the gift of prophecy.

Paul lists giving as a spiritual gift. Obviously, we all have the privilege, the responsibility and the commandment to give. However, there are some believers in a local church who are especially gifted by the grace of God to give in very special ways. This is not only in terms of their money and possessions, but also of their time, love and compassion toward those who are suffering or are in need. I have known people who were extraordinary examples of the gift of giving.

Another gift he identifies is mercy. Again, we are all challenged and commanded to show mercy. However, some believers have a special spiritual gift of mercy that burdens and equips them to show mercy toward those who are hurting in their world. God often uses suffering in their own lives and gives them the grace to cope with their own suffering. When they experience the comfort their own suffering forces them to find in God, they become ministers of comfort and have the gift of mercy (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

He identifies leading as a spiritual gift pattern. A very simple definition of a leader is that a leader is a person with followers. The grace of God and the Holy Spirit anoint some believers with a gift pattern that makes people want to follow them. That is the gift pattern of leadership according to Paul. Those who give are to give with liberality; those who show mercy are to do so with cheerfulness and those who lead are to lead with diligence.

Here are some examples of spiritual gifts Paul mentions in his other inspired letters with a brief description of each gift:

Prophecy - the ability to boldly proclaim the Word of God.

Knowledge - the ability to perceive and systematize the great facts that are hidden in God's Word.

Wisdom - the ability to apply biblical insights to a specific situation.

Teaching - the ability to impart and pass on to others the facts and insights the gifts of knowledge and wisdom discover.

Faith - the ability to see what needs to be done and believe God can do it no matter what the obstacles.

Discernment - the ability to distinguish between a spirit of error and a spirit of truth before the difference is demonstrated for all to see by the results.

Helps - the ability to give assistance where a need appears in such a way that it strengthens and encourages others spiritually.

Exhortation - the ability to challenge people to apply the Word of God.

Giving - the ability to give generously and wisely to God and the work of God.

Administration - the ability to inspire, lead, organize, delegate and supervise the work of the risen, living Christ.

Mercy - the ability to be a conduit of the love of Christ by cheerfully relating, empathizing, sympathizing and encouraging those in need.

The Healing Gifts - the ability to be a channel of God's natural and supernatural healing of body, mind, soul, emotions, and spirit.

Miracles - the ability to be a channel through which God works, not so much contrary to natural laws, but according to higher ones, not known to us.

Since Paul believes these gifts will lead us to the perfect will of God for our lives, and since finding that good, acceptable and perfect will of God is his primary application to all the profound teaching of this letter, we simply must know how to identify and then experience the spiritual gift pattern

the risen Christ has imparted to us by His grace. I therefore want to share with you some thoughts I have learned about how we can make this very important discovery.

We learn three important principles from John the Baptist. Jesus said this amazing man was the greatest man ever born (Matthew 11:11; Luke 7:28). Perhaps these principles are insights into the keys to his greatness. The first principle is that we must learn to accept the limits of our limitations. John the Baptist demonstrated this principle when he made that well-known disclaimer: "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30)

In the introduction to the Gospel of John, we read many times of John the Baptizer that he "was not." Jesus was, but John the Baptist was not. When John the Baptist has his extraordinary ministry and they ask him if he is the Messiah, he responds, "I am not." Later when they tell him that everyone is now following Jesus and listening to his preaching, he responds, "I told you that I am not. He is the Bridegroom and those people are the Bride. I am only a good friend at the wedding." (John 3:29)

A second principle we learn from John is that we must accept the responsibility for our abilities. John knew who he was not and he also knew who he was, what he was and where he was called to be. When they asked him that question, "What do you say about yourself?" he only wanted to talk about Jesus. However, when they pressed him for an answer, he finally said, in so many words, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord!' That is who, what and where I have been called to be and by the grace of God that is who, what and where I am." John accepted the limits of his limitations, but he also accepted the responsibility for his God-given abilities.

Another way to do a spiritual gift inventory is to follow these keys to spiritual gifts, which I learned from one of my mentors.

Some Keys to Discovering Spiritual Gifts:

Acquaint yourself with the biblical descriptions of spiritual gifts.

Believe that God has given you a gift(s).

Consult what you strongly desire to do and do well.

Distinguish between natural and spiritual gifts.

Expect others to help you identify your gift patterns.

Find opportunities to try out suspected gifts.

Give yourself time to become aware of and experiment with suspected gifts.

Hold a consecration service and surrender all those gifts and ministries to God unconditionally, for His service and His glory.

Reflect on those Scriptures I referenced above that describe spiritual gifts. Since there is no such thing as a born-again believer who did not receive any gifts from the Holy Spirit, believe that you are gifted. In the great gifts Chapter of Paul (1 Corinthians 12), observe the repetition of the word "every" throughout the entire teaching. He repeats for emphasis that the Spirit has given these gifts to every member of the body of Christ.

Then consider these two keys as you take your spiritual gift inventory. God usually gives us a love for the ministries for which our gifts equip us. So, consult what you really love to do for the Lord. Also, consider what you can do well for the Lord. The next key is to distinguish between spiritual and natural gifts. Natural gifts are talents and aptitudes we have before we are born again. When natural gifts are surrendered to the Lord, in a sense, they become spiritual gifts. However,

there are gifts in the lives of believers, which were not there before the Holy Spirit made their body a Temple of God.

In the Old Testament, when the Temple was under construction, we read that the Holy Spirit gave practical building talents to those we regard as tradesmen today. Spiritual gifts are not always, or only gifts like preaching, teaching, evangelism and healing. They can be very practical services believers offer unto and perform for the Lord.

You will discover that these spiritual gifts divide into two categories: some of them are pastoral gifts and some are what we might call practical gift patterns. In the sixth chapter of the Book of Acts, this distinction was recognized. The apostles called for the election of the first deacons in the Church. When seven men had been chosen, the apostles commissioned them to see to the practical business of the church. Their strategy was that those like the apostles with pastoral gifts could then give themselves continuously to prayer and the ministry of the Word of God. This decision was greatly blessed by the Lord of the Church and the entire city of Jerusalem was dynamically impacted for Christ.

We need the other members of our spiritual community if we are going to discover our spiritual gifts. One of the most important keys to discovering our spiritual gifts is to measure the impact of our spiritual life on the other members of our local church.

If there are people in your church because when you shared the Gospel with them, they believed it, you have the gift of evangelism. If believers understand difficult concepts when you teach, then you have the gift of teaching. If you have the gift of the organization and delegation of challenging tasks to many people, you have the gift of administration. If believers follow you when you challenge them to do the work of the Lord,

you have the gift of leadership. When you apply gifts like mercy, and helps, you may very well discover your gift pattern by the way believers in your church respond to your efforts in these areas.

How do you know that you do or do not have these spiritual gifts if you never make any attempts to serve in these various areas? You can see why we must have the faith to find opportunities to experiment with gifts we suspect we might have. How would you feel if you gave gifts to your family members or friends and they never even removed the wrapping to see what you had given them? How must our Lord feel when He has given us spiritual gifts and we never make the effort to discover what He has given us?

One opportunity to teach a Bible class which did not go well does not mean we do not have the gift of teaching. That is why we must give ourselves time to identify, exercise and prove that we do or do not have certain spiritual gifts.

Finally, when we have identified our gift pattern, we must hold a consecration service in our hearts and surrender these gifts to the Lord Who has given them to us. These gifts are His gift to us and what we do with them is our gift to Him. What we do with them is also our gift to our brothers and sisters in Christ because all the gifts of the Spirit are given to bless and build up the other members of our church (1 Corinthians 12:7).

Remember that Paul introduces this subject of spiritual gifts because he is showing us how to prove in experience that the plan of God for us is good, meets all His demands and moves us towards spiritual maturity. The great apostle knows that our being justified by faith and equipped with the grace of God that enables us to live right will also equip us with spiritual gifts

which enable us to minister as we apply all the teaching of this letter to ourselves.

In some ways we are like cubes because we have six sides to our lives. We have one side we show to the world. We show another side to our friends. A third side is turned to our family. Perhaps a fourth side is revealed to our spouse. A fifth side is reserved for ourselves and there may even be a sixth side we do not show to anybody but God.

We might label those dimensions of our lives by saying that one side is the person we are - our character. That second side could be the person we think we are. We call that our ego. The third side could be labeled as the person people think we are - our reputation. The fourth side could represent the person we think others think we are. That could be labeled as our self-respect, our self worth or our self-image. The fifth side could represent the person we want to be, or our ambition.

When we become new creatures in Christ, we might think of that as our sixth side, the sinful side totally seen by God and confessed to God when we were saved. This was transformed into the person God wills for us to be in Christ. That is the person the Scriptures refer to as the "self." Jesus was referring to that person when He told us that we should never lose ourselves or give anything in exchange for ourselves. (Matthew 16:26)

That is the person the prodigal son recovered when he came to himself in the hog pen. (Luke 15:11-32) We will never recover that self by comparing ourselves to others. It was that self which Paul commanded Timothy to measure by the Word of God until he experienced salvation himself and led others to salvation. (1 Timothy 4:16) That is the self we must never oppose but continuously recover by the grace of God out of the snare of the devil.

That is the person we become when we prove in experience the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God for our lives. (Romans 12:2) All the teaching of this profound letter should find its application when, by the mercy and grace of God, we become one of those new creatures of whom Paul was writing when he declared: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation. Old things have passed away. Behold (look at him), all things have become new and all this is of God." (2 Corinthians 5:18, 19)

Paul then continues this intensely practical application section of his theological masterpiece by writing a long list of commandments, which makes this chapter the most realistic application chapter in all his writings. My favorite part of the twelfth chapter reads: "Let us have no imitation Christian love. Let us have a genuine break with evil and real devotion to good. Let us have real warm affection for one another as between brothers, and a willingness to let the other man have the credit. Let us not allow slackness to spoil our work and let us keep the fires of the spirit burning, as we do our work for God." (9-11 J. B. Phillips)

One of the favorite questions of journalists is, "How would you like to be remembered?" My answer to that question is that I would like to be remembered for being real. In this intensely practical torrent of commandments, a theme that is consistently repeated is the concept of being real, not false and hypocritical, followers of Jesus Christ.

Paul begins this long list of commandments by challenging the believers who have read and understood this letter to have real Christ-like love. He means the love he labels as "the fruit of the Spirit" in his letter to the Galatians (5:22, 23). As I have observed, he profiles that love beautifully in the love chapter he wrote to the Corinthians (13:4-7).

Then he challenges these Romans to have some real repentance. When sinners are justified by faith and receive the grace to live right, they have a genuine break with evil and a real devotion to good. One of the truest signs of an authentic conversion is this genuine break with evil and devotion to living right, and doing that which is good. This is what glorifies the God Who justifies sinners.

Next Paul challenges his readers to be real in their warm-hearted affection for one another. He is essentially writing, "Let us have some real brotherhood." (Romans 12:10) When we believe in our hearts and confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord, all those who have also done this are our brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus promised that those who lost biological brothers, sisters, fathers and mothers because they became His disciples would receive spiritual fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters as they followed Him (Mark 10:29, 30). We are to not only profess this but we are to live as real brothers and sisters.

Paul is insisting on some real humility when he writes that we should let the other person have the credit for the good things that happen in our spiritual family. God hates pride (Proverbs 6:16-19). Therefore, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:14)

He then demands that there be no slackness or laziness and that we are to keep the fires of the Spirit burning as we do our work for Christ. He is now moving into the areas of motivation, spiritual anointing, our standards of excellence and our effectiveness as we serve Christ.

He may be exhorting us to accept the challenge he presented in the tenth chapter to be the ones who bring the good tidings of the Gospel to those who are lost. Do we have a passion for

the Great Commission and are we motivated by the love of Christ, as was this great Apostle? (2 Corinthians 5:14) A well-known ministry with a large staff of missionaries had this sign on the wall of their headquarters: "Are you overworked or under motivated?"

The applications continue: "Base your happiness on your hope in Christ. When trials come endure them patiently: steadfastly maintain the habit of prayer. Give freely to fellow-Christians in want, never grudging a meal or a bed to those who need them. And as for those who try to make your life a misery, bless them. Do not curse, bless. Share the happiness of those who are happy, and the sorrow of those who are sad. Live in harmony with each other. Do not become snobbish but take a real interest in ordinary people. Do not become set in your own opinions." (Romans 12: 12-16)

In these verses Paul is commanding real eternal perspective and faith in the eternal values. He is also calling for real perseverance in the face of difficult trials that these believers are facing and will face. In that context he challenges suffering saints to make prayer a real habit in their daily lives. He exhorts believers to real hospitality and to real empathy and compassion toward those with whom they share a meal and for whom they provide a bed. Their real fellowship and oneness must include ordinary people. To cultivate that oneness in Christ, they must not be set in their own opinions. A bigot is a deaf orator. He or she cannot hear when others are speaking.

Paul then continues with applications that apply primarily to their and our relationships with unbelievers:

"Do not pay back a bad turn by a bad turn, to anyone. Do not say, 'It does not matter what people think,' but see that your public behavior is above criticism. As far as your

responsibility goes, live at peace with everyone. Never take vengeance into your own hands, my dear friends: stand back and let God punish if He will. For it is written: 'Vengeance belongs to Me: I will recompense.'

"And these are God's words: 'If your enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing you will heap coals of fire upon his head.' Do not allow yourself to be overpowered by evil. Take the offensive - overpower evil by good!" (17-21 J. B. Phillips)

In verses twelve through sixteen, his applications were primarily directed toward the relationships in the church with fellow believers. In verses seventeen through twenty-one, Paul is prescribing applications that pertain primarily to the relationships believers have with the outside world. This includes those who were persecuting them like the religious authorities and the Roman military who carried out the orders of mad emperors like Nero.

We should never allow the thought that it does not matter what unbelievers think of us as believers. The commandment here is to see that our integrity in all our dealings with secular people is above reproach. Paul is essentially exhorting, "Let us have some real integrity as we relate to the people of this world."

He emphatically commands them to never retaliate in kind when they are persecuted. In this passage Paul is simply applying the teaching Jesus gave on that mountaintop in Galilee, that when struck on one side of their face, His disciples are not to resist evil, but to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39).

In this context, consider the profound wording of this commandment: "As far as your responsibility goes, live at peace with everyone." (Romans 12:18) We cannot control what the other person in our relationships is going to do. We are therefore

not responsible for their actions. With the help of God, we can control what we do in those relationships. Therefore, we are to resolve that as far as our responsibility goes, there will be peace in that relationship. Our responsibility has a point where it begins and a point where it ends. This principle of knowing where our personal responsibility begins and ends can relieve us of much anxiety as we live our lives in this world.

The passage concludes, reminding us that vengeance belongs to God. Several Old Testament Scriptures are quoted to remind us that we are playing God when we take vengeance into our own hands. Again, in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, Paul not only forbids vengeance, He commands that we feed our enemies when they are hungry and give them water when they are thirsty.

In the first three centuries of church history it was illegal to be a Christian. One of the greatest dynamics in the witness of the persecuted church that echoes down through the centuries to us today is summarized in the final words of this chapter: "Do not allow yourself to be overpowered by evil. Take the offensive - overpower evil by good!"

Chapter Two

"Ministers of God"

(13:1-14)

"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the

authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil.

"Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor." (13:1-7)

This very practical application section of Paul's greatest letter began exhorting us to apply all these inspired teachings of Paul to ourselves, to the brothers and sisters in our spiritual community, and then to the unbelievers in our culture. Paul now exhorts us to apply the doctrinal section of this letter (Chapters 1-11) to the government that rules over us. In other words, he is commanding us to apply his theological masterpiece to the responsibilities we have to be good citizens of the communities and of the country in which we live as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This thirteenth chapter is a short but powerful statement regarding the Christian as a citizen. Paul will write to the Church in Philippi that our real citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20). As I observed in my commentary on Chapter Ten, Roman citizens were required to throw a pinch of incense into a fire every year and confess, "Caesar is Lord!" Thousands of believers died because they would not make that pledge of allegiance to Caesar. The inspired confession that cost them their lives was the doctrinal basis of fellowship in the New Testament Church: "Jesus is Lord!" (1 Corinthians 12:3) We

pledge our first and supreme allegiance every time we confess that, "Jesus is Lord!" (Romans 10:9)

However, millions of believers live out their lives here on earth as citizens of nations. This chapter addresses the way these citizens of heaven who lived in Rome were to apply the teaching of this letter to the immoral, unjust and corrupt governing authorities who ruled their lives in the capital city of the Roman Empire. We must obviously make the proper applications to the governing authorities who enforce the laws of the country, city, village, or rural community in which we live.

He begins this chapter by making an amazing declaration. He writes: "There is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." Three times in these seven verses Paul calls those who enforce the laws of the Roman Empire, "the ministers of God." The wicked and deranged Emperor Nero was on the throne of the Roman Empire when Paul declared that those who have the authority to govern receive that authority by the appointment of God.

This truth is stated very clearly by the prophet Daniel. As a teenager, Daniel stood in the presence of one of the greatest and most powerful totalitarian emperors who ever lived and declared that "God removes kings and He sets up kings." (Daniel 2:21)

The fourth chapter of Daniel is one of the most amazing chapters in the Bible because it is the confession of faith of the Emperor Nebuchadnezzar, who ruled the Babylonian World Empire. After Daniel had proved God to Nebuchadnezzar over many years, God afflicted the Emperor of Babylon with insanity. He spent seven years in the fields like an animal until God made him know that, "The most High rules and gives the kingdoms of

man to whomever He chooses and sometimes gives those kingdoms to the lowliest of men." (Daniel 4:17)

Today, millions of believers live under the rule and authority of wicked, unjust, ruthless dictators. These teachings of Paul relate to them in the same way they applied to the believers to whom they were originally written. He teaches that we should not resist these rulers because if we do, we are resisting the ordinance of God. He adds that those who resist will bring judgment upon themselves. He reasons that even rulers like these are not a terror to good works but to evil works. The law-abiding citizen has no need to fear these authorities. If we want to be unafraid of these authorities, we should obey the law.

The law enforcement officer is good for the good citizen. Three times he declares this authority to be the "minister of God" for good to those who desire live good and peaceful lives. However, there is also the warning that if we break the law, this peace officer will use his sword on us. Paul declares this law enforcement authority to be the minister of God while he is using that sword on those who break the law.

In this context he returns to the theme of the wrath of God. In the first chapter he declared that, "The wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of man" by the Gospel he preached. That is a future wrath of God, which will be applied in the coming judgment. However, in this passage he is declaring a present wrath of God against those who break the laws God has instituted. This present wrath of God is expressed and applied by law enforcement officers.

This law enforcement officer can represent the police, or taken to a higher level of application, this could apply to the military, which are used when local police authorities face challenges they cannot handle. There is a strong case in the

Scripture for those who oppose war and declare themselves to be pacifists. I have great respect for a sincere pacifist. I am not a pacifist and my reasons are found in the first seven verses of this chapter.

There are two very important observations we must make about these verses. The first one is that this is not the only teaching in the Bible on this subject. A second observation is that what Paul writes here about the governing authority being the minister of God is not always true. There is also a strong case in the Scriptures for what we call "civil disobedience."

In the very first days of the church, the religious authorities commanded the apostles not to preach Christ. The first time that happens, the disciples of Jesus essentially respond that only these highly esteemed religious authorities who have issued this order are wise enough to know whether they should obey God or man. However, the next time they are forbidden to preach Christ, they respond immediately, "We ought to obey God rather than man." (Acts 4:19; 5:29) This incident teaches us that there can be a time in the lives of believers when the proper response to corrupt authorities is civil disobedience.

When the religious authorities asked Jesus if it was right to pay taxes to Caesar, Jesus gave a profound teaching regarding the citizenship issues of a devout believer (Matthew 22:17-21). These religious leaders were attempting to discredit Him and they thought they were asking Jesus a question He could not answer. If Jesus said it was wrong to pay taxes to Rome, the Roman soldiers who were present in the Temple when this question was asked would have arrested Him immediately. If He said it was right to pay those taxes, the Jews would have been offended, especially the Zealots who believed in continuing the resistance against Rome.

Jesus asked for a coin and when He held it up, He asked the question, "Whose image is stamped on this coin?" The answer was, "Caesar's." Then came His profound and wise declaration: "Then give to Caesar that which is Caesar's, and give to God that which is God's." (Matthew 22:21)

As with all the teachings of Jesus, "The plain things are the main things and the main things are the plain things." The coin has the image of Caesar stamped on it so give the money to Caesar. You have the image of God stamped on you so give yourself to God. In other words, pay your taxes, but give your total allegiance to God. Sometimes, Caesar will ask for that which belongs to God. When he does, you cannot to put him first and give yourself to Caesar.

We are not only to obey the laws of Caesar because we will experience the present wrath of God at the hands of the governing authorities if we do not obey them. We are to obey the law and be good citizens for conscience sake. A believer must obey the law because it is only right to do so. His or her conscience will convict them if they do not obey the law as good citizens. We are to pay our taxes and never withhold that which is due.

A man in America wrote the Tax Collection Office: "I am sending you five hundred dollars I owe you because fifteen years ago I cheated on my income taxes and my conscience is bothering me. I cannot sleep at night. If I am still unable to sleep I will send you the balance of what I owe you."

The applications for us in this chapter are obvious. Governments have been assessing taxes on their citizens for thousands of years. Jesus and Paul teach that we should pay our taxes. Paul also writes that we should honor and fear those to whom honor and fear is due. Peter also exhorts us to honor the king - the highest ruler. (1 Peter 2:17)

Paul then returns to practical application commandments like those he shared with us in the twelfth chapter: "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law." (Romans 13:8-10)

Paul consistently builds on the teaching of Jesus. His Lord stated that He had come to fulfill the Law of Moses and of God (Matthew 5:17-20). He did that by passing the Law of God through the prism of the love of God before He applied the Law of God to the lives of the people of God. Paul refers to this elsewhere as "the Spirit of the Law." (2 Corinthians 3:6) If we love our neighbor, we will not break any of the commandments where our neighbor is concerned. In these verses, Paul spells out what he means by the Spirit of the Law and what Jesus meant when He claimed that He had come to fulfill the Law.

The practical applications continue as he concludes this chapter: "And do this, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep; for now our salvation is nearer than when we first believed; 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. Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." (11-14)

Paul writes that the night is almost over and the day is at hand. Jesus was the Light of the world and as long as He was in this world, it was spiritual daytime. Peter wrote that when we

approach the Word of God in our spiritual darkness, two miracles happen in our hearts: The Day dawns and the Morning Star rises in our hearts (2 Peter 1:19). When we have experienced the new birth as described by these beautiful metaphors, we have the capacity to be the light and to be lights in this world (Matthew 5:14; Philippians 2:14-16). We are exhorted to be the light of the world and to be lights in this world until Jesus returns (Matthew 5:16; Philippians 2:15) When Jesus returns, it will be a spiritual daytime for this world.

The Apostle Paul tells us that daytime is nearer than when we first believed and that it is, in fact, at hand. He is not only addressing the return of the Lord when he writes these words. He is challenging believers to apply his exhortations to love while it is day because the night is coming when they will not be able to love one another and the hurting lost people all around them. Jesus modeled and gave this same exhortation to His disciples when He said: "I must work the works of Him Who sent Me while it is day. The night is coming when no man can work." (John 9:4)

Many religions and poets describe death as a sleep. The Scripture describes life as a sleep and death as our waking up (Psalm 90:5). Paul is obviously thinking of the return of Christ and the end of our lives when he writes these beautiful exhortations. He challenges us to wake up, cast off, or undress our old nature, then get dressed and walk properly.

When he writes to the Ephesians he uses these same metaphors in greater detail (Ephesians 4:24-5:17). When we wake up in the morning, many of us take off our sleeping clothes, then go to a closet and choose the clothes we are going to wear that day. Paul uses this metaphor to tell us that we have two choices every day. We can put on the rags of our old life, or we can wear the robes of our new life.

He labels these rags and robes in great detail. The rags of the old life are things like anger, wrath, bitterness, malice, corrupt communication, lying, stealing and sexual sins. He also labels the robes of the new life as truth, communication that builds up and ministers grace to the other person, love, tender heartedness, and mutual forgiveness.

In this passage, Paul gives us an abbreviated version of this same metaphor. The rags of the old life, which we are to put off, are: revelry and drunkenness, lewdness and lust, strife and envy, the flesh and its lusts. Then we are to put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh (human nature unaided by God), to fulfill its lusts.

This passage was made famous through the conversion of St. Augustine who lived in the fourth century. He was living a wild life of indulging in every kind of sexual sin. One day he was in a garden with a friend and was expressing his helplessness and lamenting his many attempts to change his moral behavior. Children were playing in the next garden on the other side of a wall. He believed he heard the voice of a child saying, "Take and read!" On a table nearby there was a copy of this letter of Paul to the Romans. He picked it up and his eyes fell upon these words: "Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts." (Romans 13:13-14)

At that very moment, Christ entered Augustine's life. He became a changed man and one of the greatest Christians who ever lived. He was a strong leader of the Church in North Africa, and through his writings he has been blessing millions of believers all over the world since the fourth century.

Paul did not wait to start making applications to his teaching in this letter until he wrote the twelfth chapter. In the fifth chapter he made the application that sinners who have been declared righteous are to live right and he showed them how to live right. That was a short version of this application he is now spelling out in greater detail.

We are to make no provision for the flesh, meaning our human nature unaided by God, and we are not to be driven to fulfill the lusts of our flesh. Although these words have a broader application than merely sexual sins, he is primarily addressing sexual sins. He wrote much to the Church in Corinth regarding their sexual sins. The Corinthian believers struggled in this area of their spiritual lives because the city of Corinth was a synonym for sexual impurity.

The worship of idols was prominent there and since some perceived their god as the source of erotic sexual love, that idol worship involved an elaborate system of prostitution, including the perversions that involved homosexuals and child prostitutes. Many of the Corinthians who were part of the church Paul established there were involved in this immorality before they became believers. Now as followers of Christ, he confronted their sexual impurity, and asked them, "Do you not realize that your body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore, glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." He then essentially wrote, "Your body was not made for sex, but for God!" (1 Corinthians 6:13, 19, 20)

These same conditions prevailed all over the Roman Empire and Paul is confronting that kind of sexual sin when he writes this application: "Let us walk properly, as in the day, not in revelry and drunkenness, not in lewdness and lust, not in strife

and envy. But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts."

Chapter Three

"Disputes Among Disciples"

(14:1-15:13)

To live above with the saints we have loved, Oh that will be glory. But, to live below with those we know, that is another story!

I have been a pastor for five decades. Anyone who has had the responsibility for the pastoral care of the Lord's people that long knows it can be difficult to live below with the saints we know. It has always been so.

When we study the letters of Paul, it is painfully obvious that the churches he established were not perfect churches. His two letters to the Corinthians make that abundantly clear. The fourteenth chapter of this letter to the Romans shows us that the disciples in Rome did not have a perfect church because they were imperfect saints.

When there was a problem in the churches he established, that problem results in a masterpiece from this apostle as he writes inspired solutions to those problems. Because Jews had followed Paul and confused the believers in a church, teaching that Gentile believers must be justified by keeping the Law, we therefore have another masterpiece on justification by faith - which is a miniature of this Roman letter - the letter of Paul to the Galatians.

The Corinthian believers had intellectual questions regarding resurrection. Those questions gave birth to the great

resurrection chapter of the Bible and two chapters that might be called "Resurrection Applied". (1 Corinthians 15; 2 Corinthians 4, 5) That same church did not know how to love and they were confused regarding the function of the Holy Spirit in a church. We therefore have the great love chapter of the Bible and the chapters that precede and follow which are masterpieces on the subject of the function of the Holy Spirit in a church (1 Corinthians 12-14).

The disputes among the disciples in Rome move Paul to write this chapter, which is a masterpiece we might call, "Love Applied". Once again we have an example of a chapter interrupting the flow of thought because the division is not in the right place. The theme Paul is addressing here in Chapter fourteen continues through the thirteenth verse of Chapter Fifteen.

This long passage of Scripture actually concludes the extraordinary teaching of this letter. In the rest of the fifteenth chapter, he shares personal mission objectives with them. In the sixteenth chapter, he writes personal greetings with twenty-four people he knows in the church there in Rome and with nine people who are with him in Corinth while he is writing this letter. However, the theological teachings and applications of this letter end at the thirteenth verse of the fifteenth chapter.

He wrote three chapters to the Corinthians, which present principles that parallel what he prescribes here for these disciples in Rome (1 Corinthians 8-10). Both these passages are masterpieces, which teach us how to live here on earth with the saints we know. The guiding principle in both profound prescriptions is the love Paul profiled so beautifully in his great love chapter (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

Jewish and Gentile believers worshiped and often lived together in the first generation of the New Testament churches. We have seen that Paul is addressing Jew and Gentile all the way through this letter. That is because he is trying to win Jews who were not convinced that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. This is also because there were many Jews in the church at Rome who did believe in Christ, had confessed Him as their Lord and were a vital part of the church.

Many of the disputes among these disciples in Rome were conflicts that were rooted in the differences between Jewish and Gentile believers. These same issues were addressed at that first church council described in the fifteenth chapter of the Book of Acts. Should Gentile believers be Jewish in the way they live out their faith and life in Christ? Should Jewish disciples of Jesus give up all their Jewish observances regarding the foods they do, or do not eat, and the way they observe special holy days?

There were therefore disputes regarding days, diets, drinking wine and many other issues that can be attributed to the fact that the Jews and Gentiles lived, worshiped, and served their Lord Jesus Christ together in the "First Church of Rome". Not all these disputes were derived from that mix of Jew and Gentile disciples. They had many of the same challenges to their spiritual oneness that we have in our churches today.

One of the challenges we face in our relationships with other believers in our churches is the issue of what we might call "taboos". The Scripture teaches moral absolutes. We might say these issues are black and white issues: fornication, adultery, stealing, lying and other negative behavior are clearly forbidden in the Word of God. However, there are other issues regarding the behavior of believers that are not clearly addressed in the Bible. We could call these the "gray issues"

of Christian behavior. Many churches resolve these "gray issues" by compiling a list of proper and improper behavior for those who are members of their church.

Sometimes these lists can be labeled as "geographical holiness". This is because in different parts of the world - and even in different areas of a country - what believers consider right or wrong behavior for a disciple of Jesus varies greatly. As a new believer I traveled 800 hundred kilometers to attend college to prepare for seminary and the ministry.

The church in which I came to faith had a little blue book in which they listed all the things a believer in that church could not do. You would not be accepted as a member of that church, and you could never be a leader in that church unless you agreed with that little blue book of standards for the behavior of a believer. One of their do-not-do listings was that you could not smoke tobacco products.

When I reported to a small mountain church where I was to be a guest preacher one Sunday morning, it seemed as if the whole church was smoking, including the pastor. Raising tobacco was the livelihood of most of the people who attended that church - including the pastor. While he was blowing smoke, he informed me that I could not preach in his church that day because I had traveled on Sunday. He informed me that any preacher ought to know that traveling on Sunday was a sin! While I was in a state of shock because a preacher was blowing smoke, he introduced me to something that was not in the blue book my church had five hundred miles away.

Many years later when I had been a pastor for decades, I visited for a week with a modern-day Apostle Paul in Greece. This man was a lawyer and he was the pastor of "The Free Church of Greece". At that time it was illegal in Greece to have any church but the Orthodox Church. He spent much of his time

getting his people out of jail. I also had the privilege to preach in his large church in Athens, and in some of his seventy-five daughter churches in places like Corinth and Thessalonica.

With great passion he would eloquently preach the Gospel in the Greek language to an entire restaurant when we had finished our meals. While I could not understand him, I was touched to see tears streaming down the faces of those who were listening to him.

When we ate our meals together, I was surprised when he drank wine. Any form of alcoholic beverage was also forbidden in that blue book I mentioned. I had been taught that those who drank alcoholic beverages were definitely not authentic Christians. Toward the end of that week, he asked me if his drinking wine offended me. I replied that Paul did write that we should take a little wine. He knew his Greek very well of course and so he replied, "Oh Paul wrote that to Timothy because Timothy was sick. If Timothy had been well, Paul would have written, 'Take a much wine!'"

I learned that traveling five hundred miles from home, or crossing an ocean introduced me to a different "blue book" of standards of what is considered right and wrong behavior for a disciple of Jesus. That is why the "blue book" approach to Christian behavior is called "geographical holiness".

When converted sinners are convicted of their sins they sometimes decide that all their behavior before they were born again is not only wrong for them, now that they have become a disciple of Jesus, but that life style and everything associated with it is also wrong for every other believer. Believers are also sometimes persuaded that every time the Holy Spirit convicts them that something is wrong for them that activity is also wrong for every believer in their church.

I am not writing or thinking now of those black and white issues I mentioned earlier, like sins that are clearly prohibited in the Bible. Paul teaches several application principles in this chapter that should be applied to the behavior of believers - what we wear, eat, drink, whether we consider Sunday the Lord's day to be observed like a Sabbath, what we consider to be worldly amusements and many other issues that are not clearly addressed in the Bible. For example, smoking tobacco is not mentioned in the Bible. When believers agree that certain behavior is wrong and that behavior is not addressed in the Bible, we call that gray issue a "taboo".

As an example, a seminary handbook from the early 1800's taught that sleeping with a pillow or taking warm baths were wrong and sinful because they were "worldly comforts". Yet today I know of no one that believes and practices those taboos. Yet those who have very strong persuasions regarding their taboos are convinced that these issues are addressed in the Scripture in principle. They believe and teach that smoking, for instance, is wrong because it is clearly unhealthy. However, I have yet to find a church that has obesity in their "blue book". Doctors tell us that being overweight can decrease our life expectancy by one third. However, believers have not seemed to agree that obesity qualifies to be a taboo.

I share all this perspective with you by way of an introduction that you may appreciate this masterpiece Paul has given the church in Rome, which shows us how to be a colony of love and heaven on earth as we resolve the conflicts that divide us.

As he closes this letter to the Romans, Paul prioritizes thirty-six verses to address the same subject to which he devoted three entire chapters in his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 8-10). That subject is essentially

how to live here below with the saints we know when we are not in agreement. In both these great passages of Scripture, Paul teaches profound principles that should govern our attitudes and our relationships as we deal with the issues that divide us as believers, while cherishing the relationships we have with Christ and each other.

There was one primary issue to address in his letter to the Corinthians. Many of the Corinthian believers were idol worshipers before they were called to salvation and to live as brothers and sisters in Christ through the ministry of the Apostle Paul. Meat that had been sacrificed in these temples was later sold at a discount in the market places of Corinth.

There was terrible immorality associated with that idol worship. Many Corinthian disciples of Jesus believed it was all right for believers to buy and eat that meat. Those who had been deeply involved in that idol worship believed it was a sin to eat this meat which had been associated with the terrible sin of idolatry and lifestyle they were trying to put behind them forever. This became a major dispute in the Church at Corinth.

The essence of those three chapters Paul wrote to the Corinthians was that the issue was not whether it was right or wrong to eat that meat. The important and critical factor was, "How much do you love the brother or sister who think it is wrong to eat that meat? Christ loved them enough to die for them. Do you love them enough to give up your right to eat a plate of meat so they will not stumble or be offended?"

In addition to the principle of love, Paul concludes those three chapters with three principles that should guide the Corinthians and us as we apply this teaching (1 Corinthians 10:30, 31). The first principle is, "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do everything to the glory of God." The second principle is the salvation of others, by which he means

the spiritual blessing and edification of the weaker brother or sister, who think it is wrong to eat that meat. His third principle is to make certain that we are not seeking our own profit.

Paul described those who believed they should not eat that meat as "the weaker brother". He begins this great passage to the Romans by introducing that same concept. We are to receive, or accept into our fellowship, those who are weak. He then writes these thirty-six verses in which he addresses the issues that are causing the disputes between these disciples in Rome.

As a key to this long passage of Scripture, I want to begin my commentary with a summary introduction of what Paul teaches here. If we read Scripture looking for nothing we will probably find it. My next few pages will show you what to look for as you study the way Paul concludes this letter:

As you read and we study this passage, observe how Paul shares principles with these Roman disciples that have striking parallels to the principles he taught the Corinthians. He will challenge them to resolve these conflicts on the basis of conscience (14, 22, 23). Someone has said that conscience is that still small voice that makes us feel still smaller.

Conscience is not a safe or infallible guide because conscience is conditioned by what we have been taught by our parents, or by believers who were our spiritual parents when we were spiritual children. Taboos we have been taught by others may or may not be based on Scripture. They may or may not represent behavior that is absolutely right or wrong. If we believe that behavior is wrong, we should not ignore what our conscience is telling us. However, if our conscience is not an infallible guide for ourselves, we certainly should not expect our conscience to be the guide for other believers.

Another principle Paul shares with these Roman believers is that these issues should be resolved on the basis of conviction. When the Holy Spirit convicts us that certain behavior is wrong for us, that is not something our parents, or other believers have taught us, the key to our relationship with the Holy Spirit is our personal obedience. Shortly after the Day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed that the Holy Spirit is given to those who obey Him (Acts 5:32). We should always submit to the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

However, this raises an important question: "When the Holy Spirit convicts us that something is wrong for us, does that mean it is wrong for every other believer?" My conscience should not be the guide for the behavior of other believers. Should the way the Holy Spirit convicts me be the guide for other believers? In other words, should we play the role of the Holy Spirit in the lives of other believers? Does the Holy Spirit convict all believers the same way in these matters? Is it possible that because of my life before I became a believer certain behavior is wrong for me but not wrong for other believers?

This leads to a third principle Paul will teach the disputing disciples who were part of the church at Rome in the first century. Paul teaches the same principle he shared with the Corinthians. He challenges both these churches to resolve their disputes by applying the principle of consideration. He exhorts them to consider the other believer's conscience and convictions.

Paul commended the believers in Corinth who knew there was nothing wrong with eating meat that had been sacrificed to an idol because the idol was simply wood, stone, silver and gold and had nothing to do with the true and living God we come to know through Christ. But, he wrote, "There is not in every man

that knowledge. Some, being weak, think it is wrong to eat that meat." (1 Corinthians 8:4-13) The issue was therefore how much they loved that weaker brother.

He presents this same principle to the Romans with these beautiful words: "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself." (Romans 14:7) Based on our conscience and Holy Spirit convictions, we may have liberty to practice certain behavior, or not practice that behavior. However, just as he wrote the Corinthians, he will write to these Romans that all believers do not have that same liberty. The guiding principle is how much we love the weaker brother who does not have the same liberty we have because of our conscience and convictions. Someone has said that we have the liberty to waive our fist in the air, but our liberty ends where the other person's nose begins.

This will lead to a fourth principle Paul will teach these Romans as he taught in his letter to the Corinthians. That principle is charity, or the love taught in his great love chapter. Peter wrote that, "Love covers a multitude of sins." (1 Peter 4:8) In his letter to the Corinthians that love chapter was the solution to all the problems in the Corinthian Church. Ultimately, as Paul addresses these disputes between disciples in Rome, the solution that will deal with the problems, but cherish the relationships in their church will be the love of Christ.

Disputes Among Disciples Verse-By-Verse

"Receive one who is weak in the faith, but not to disputes over doubtful things. For one believes he may eat all things, but he who is weak eats only vegetables. Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him. Who are you to

judge another's servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.

"One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind. He who observes the day, observes it to the Lord; and he who does not observe the day, to the Lord he does not observe it. He who eats, eats to the Lord, for he gives God thanks; and he who does not eat, to the Lord he does not eat, and gives God thanks. For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself, for if we live we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:1-8)

Paul writes that the church should receive him who is weak but we should try to avoid disputes with him. He means that we should be very accepting of new believers who are weak in the faith because they have not had time to learn and grow in Christ. I am convinced that he means we should not immediately become involved in arguments with them over issues they have because they are new believers. He wrote similar advice to Timothy when he was telling him how to reach, teach, or counsel difficult people (2 Timothy 2:23-26).

In chapters nine through eleven in his letter to the Romans, Paul wrote that God wanted to make the Jews jealous when they saw the loving relationship Gentiles had with God and each other through Christ. We should so live the love of Christ before these new believers that they will want to know everything they can learn about how our being separated unto Christ gives us the quality of life we enjoy with Christ and our brothers and sisters in Christ. Then they will also earnestly desire to be holy and live their lives separated unto Christ.

God answered the many questions of Job by revealing Himself to Job and establishing a relationship with him. Likewise, when young believers come to truly know God through Christ, their questions will be answered. The proper emphasis of sanctification will also be modeled for them, which is to be separated unto Christ and as a consequence of that relationship, separated from our sins.

The great apostle addresses the disputes related to diet. Because in the Genesis account of creation states that God gave us herbs to eat, there were believers in the church at Rome (who were probably Jews), who believed we should only eat vegetables. Paul labels these vegetarians as weak, which means that he did not agree with them.

He uses a beautiful metaphor as he exhorts those who eat meat not to judge the vegetarians. When Paul wrote this letter, half the people in the city of Rome were slaves. His readers therefore understood this metaphor. Slaves answered and were totally accountable to their masters. He began this letter stating that he, and they were the slaves of their Lord Jesus Christ. He now teaches that they have no right to judge their brother in Christ, who is their fellow slave. They are both accountable to their Master, the Lord Jesus Christ and they do not answer to each other.

He then addresses the issue of the observance of special days. The obvious day problem was the observance of the Jewish Sabbath and all the prohibitions that were associated with the Jewish Sabbath. One of the strongest proofs of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was the fact that the Jewish apostles changed their day of worship from the seventh day to the first day of the week. They never refer to this as their Sabbath. They did not simply change their Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. They refer to Sunday as "the Lord's Day". They obviously changed

their day of worship because their Lord was raised from the dead on the first day of the week.

In addition to the Sabbath issue, some disciples in Rome believed the Lord's Day was to be treated like a Sabbath with very special observances. Many believers today consider Sunday their Sabbath and discipline the Lord's Day with many restrictions on their activities. Other believers ask the question, "And so what is Monday, Tuesday and the other days of the week?" They are fully convinced in their own minds that every day is the Lord's Day, or they esteem every day alike.

This very same problem apparently existed in that first generation of the New Testament Church in Rome: "One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind." (5) Since this is a gray issue in the opinion of the apostle, he does not declare a right or wrong position. He simply rules that each person should be fully convinced in his or her own mind. Those who do not agree should be loving, respectful and accepting of the spiritual integrity and the right of those who hold a different view to believe the way they do.

A contemporary statement about unity many believers accept which is based on this passage is: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials respectful understanding and acceptance; in all things, love." That sums up the inspired counsel of Paul to these Romans regarding diets and the observance of special days. It is one of his most beautiful statements of this principle in the writings of Paul when he writes: "For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself for if we live we live to the Lord and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." (7)

Everything we do we do to the Lord. Even though the emphasis here is on the horizontal relationships we have with

one another in spiritual community, we must never forget those profound words God spoke to Abraham: "I am Almighty God. Walk before Me and be perfect." This verse can also be translated: "I am God Almighty; serve me faithfully and live a blameless life." (Genesis 17:1)

He then places before his readers the ultimate reality and the perfect example of what he is teaching: "For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living. But why do you judge your brother? Or why do you show contempt for your brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. For it is written: 'As I live, says the LORD, every knee shall bow to Me, and every tongue shall confess to God.'" So then each of us shall give account of himself to God. Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather resolve this, not to put a stumbling block or a cause to fall in our brother's way." (Romans 14:9-13)

Having taught that we are all accountable as slaves to our Master and our Lord, Jesus Christ, Paul now spells out that ultimate accountability. Jesus Christ is not only the Lord of the living, but as the One to Whom all judgment has been committed, He will be the Lord of the dead as well (John 5:22).

He often brings this perspective into his teaching. He reminds those who built upon the foundation of his ministry in Corinth that their work will one day face the harsh reality of the Judgment Seat of Christ (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

He told those who favored his ministry in Corinth and rejected the ministries of others like Peter and Apollos who also preached there, that they should not judge him (favorably), because one day the Lord would bring to light the hidden motives of his heart and only then will he receive praise, or be judged (1 Corinthians 4:3-5). He also warned the Corinthians as he

does the Romans in this passage, that we must all appear before Christ and give an account of everything we have done, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10).

Since we are going to be judged by the Lord why are we judging each other? In plain language, he is essentially asking, "Who appointed you to be the judge of all who follow Christ?" He concludes this teaching with the exhortation that we should not place a stumbling block, or a cause to fall in our brother's way.

Paul now expands this exhortation with more specific instructions regarding the responsibility we have for our weaker brother as he writes: "I know and am convinced by the Lord Jesus that there is nothing unclean of itself; but, to him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.

"Therefore do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who serves Christ in these things is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Romans 14:14-18)

When Paul writes, "I know and am convinced by Jesus," there is always the possibility that he is making reference to the experience he describes in his letter to the Galatians (1:1-2:10). This could also be a reference to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels with which he would have been familiar (Mark 7:18, 19). Jesus did teach in these chapters that all food is clean, which was revolutionary teaching for a Jew. The truth Jesus was teaching in the Gospels and Paul is teaching here is that it is the spiritual condition of the person who is eating the food that makes it clean or unclean.

Paul returns to the issue of conscience when he writes: "To him who considers anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean." As he did with the Corinthians, he then stresses the principle of Christ-like love when he writes: "Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died." (Romans 14:15) The way to deal with the problems but cherish the relationship with your brother is to realize that the issue is not to judge whether you or your brother is right. Christ loves him so much that He died for him. The issue is how much do you love your brother?

The apostle then writes two profound inspired teachings: "Do not let your good be spoken of as evil; for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." (16,17) As he addresses the individual disciple in Rome, he is now making the point that it is a good thing to be right. However, if our being right is offending and hurtful to our brother, our good is being spoken of as evil.

He then summarizes the essence of the kingdom of God in three ways: righteousness, peace and joy. He means that the kingdom of God is not all about being right. This letter is really all about that righteousness which is the gift of God to be received by faith. Your attitude and your actions toward your brother should be all about the way you model, inspire and instruct your brother by your life to trust Jesus Christ for that righteousness which is by faith.

The peace of which Paul writes here is that fruit of the Spirit. Peace which does not make good sense, because the Holy Spirit gives this peace to believers even when they are experiencing horrible adversity. The joy of which he writes here could be paraphrased as the happiness that does not make good sense because this joy is also a fruit of the Spirit

experienced by believers even when they have no reason to be happy and every reason to be sad. The love of which Paul writes here is also a fruit, a proof, or an evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers (Galatians 5:22, 23). This love also often does not make sense because they love their enemies.

Essentially, Paul is teaching that the kingdom of God, with its eternal values and blessings is not about what we eat and drink. He is again building on the teachings of Jesus Christ Who taught in His great Sermon on the Mount, that life is more than meat and the body is more than what we wear. We are to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Then all these peripheral issues will be ours because our heavenly Father knows we need all these things (Matthew 6:8; 33).

He writes a benediction on this profound counsel by adding: "For he who serves Christ in these (three) things is acceptable to God and approved by men." (Romans 14:18)

As a great teacher, Paul knows that if you do not repeat, you do not teach because repetition is the essence of education. He repeats for emphasis as he summarizes this teaching: "Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another." (19)

In his first letter to the Corinthians, he asks and answers an important question: "How is it when you come together? Let all things be done for edification." (1 Corinthians 14:26) In that fourteenth chapter of First Corinthians, where Paul prescribes the order that should prevail among us as believers when the Holy Spirit is in us and upon us, nearly forty times he repeats the emphasis that when we come together as believers, we are to edify one another.

There is a passage of Scripture in the Book of Hebrews that teaches us to do most of the things believers expect to

experience in their assembling together, before we leave for our worship service with other believers. When you begin to ask in your mind, "Why then should we go to church?" He answers that when we assemble together with our brothers and sisters in Christ we are to provoke one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:21-24). The New Testament consistently teaches that we are to look not only on our own needs when we gather as a spiritual community. We are to look on the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ and see how God would have us respond (Philippians 2:4).

His summary repetition of this principle places a strong emphasis on our responsibility to edify and bless our brother. When he uses the term brother in these passages, he is using that word in a generic sense and he means our fellow believer, brothers and sisters. This is his strongest statement of what might be called his "weaker brother teaching". People often ask the question when they make a serious study of this emphasis in the writing of Paul: "How far do you go with this love for the weaker brother?" In this summary passage Paul answers that question. See if you can find his answer: "Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All things indeed are pure, but it is evil for the man who eats with offense. It is good neither to eat meat nor drink wine nor do anything by which your brother stumbles or is offended or is made weak." (Romans 14:20, 21)

There we have Paul's answer to that question. We are not to eat meat nor drink wine, or do anything that causes our brother to stumble, be offended or made weak. Another question we need to ask here is this question: "If we completely accommodate the weakness of our weak brother, will we not keep him weak?" That is a good question. In his counsel to the Corinthians, the first one of those three principles with which

he concluded his masterpiece to them on this same subject, was that they were to do everything to the glory of God. Walking before God and doing what glorifies God is a higher priority than accommodating our weak brother. That is why he writes: "Do you have faith? Have it to yourself before God. Happy is he who does not condemn himself in what he approves. But he who doubts is condemned if he eats, because he does not eat from faith; for whatever is not from faith is sin." (22, 23)

In this magnificent passage, Paul has challenged these Roman believers to look in and examine their conscience and their convictions. Then he challenged them to look around with love and consider their brother, especially their weaker brother. He is now exhorting them to look up and walk before God. They are to bring all these matters that are causing these disputes among them before God.

The New Testament clearly states: "Without faith it is impossible to please God for he who would come to God must believe that He is and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him." (Hebrews 11:6)

If we cannot come to God and if we cannot please God without faith, then anything we do apart from our faith in Christ is sin. Although the essence and emphasis of this chapter has been to look in and then look around, these disputing disciples must look up, in faith, or they will never have the wisdom and the grace to look in and around, as they should.

Jesus taught that we must lift up our eyes before we look on the harvest fields, which are over ripe and waiting to be harvested (John 4:35). He was talking about people when He gave the apostles that prayer request. Jesus was teaching that we must look up before we look around. We are to see people as God and Christ see them. If we see people through the love of God

and Christ, we will never see people who cannot be reached by divine love. Paul is teaching that same up look in these last two verses.

As we begin reading the fifteenth chapter of this letter, we find another place where I believe the chapter division has been misplaced. Paul's wonderful teaching which addresses the disputes among the disciples in Rome actually continues in this chapter. The opening verses of this chapter obviously continue this teaching: "We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification." (Romans 15:1, 2)

Having summarized in these first two verses what he has taught in the fourteenth chapter, Paul continues this subject through the thirteenth verse of this chapter. He can think of no greater example of what he is teaching than the example of his Lord and Savior: "For even Christ did not please Himself; but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached You fell on Me.' (Psalm 69:9) For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope. Now may the God of patience and comfort grant you to be like-minded toward one another, according to Christ Jesus, that you may with one mind and one mouth glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God." (Romans 15:3-7)

In the context of his teaching in this letter regarding the weaker brother, Paul has reduced his exhortation to principles like conscience, conviction, consideration and self-sacrificing love. When he wrote to the Corinthians he reduced three chapters on this subject into these three principles: (1) Do everything you do to the glory of God. (2) Be sure you are

seeking the profit of others that they might be saved and edified. (3) Make sure you are not seeking your own profit. (1 Corinthians 10:31-33)

Is there a better example in the Bible of someone who applied these principles than the example of Jesus Christ? He certainly was seeking the glory of His Father. He was not seeking His own profit and He was seeking our salvation when He died on the cross for us all. Paul therefore exhorts his readers to be like-minded, or to be like Christ. The word "Christian" actually means "Christ-like".

He quotes the Old Testament as he presents Jesus as the supreme example of these principles. Certainly, when He became sin for us Jesus was the absolute model of what Paul is teaching. We will be of one mind, have unity, or oneness and stop disputing with one another when we have the mind of Christ toward our brothers and sisters, both those who are weak and those who are strong.

He now concludes the teaching and applications to his teachings in this letter by presenting the way Jesus related to His weaker brothers, the Jews. Jesus spent three years in sometimes, hostile dialogue with the Jewish religious leaders, pleading with them to participate with Him in His mission to bring salvation to this world. As he does, Paul returns to the subject of the ninth through the eleventh chapters by quoting the prophets who predict a spiritual return of the Jews: "Now I say that Jesus Christ has become a servant to the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made to the fathers, and that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy, as it is written:

'For this reason I will confess You among the Gentiles, and sing to Your name.' And again he says: 'Rejoice, Oh Gentiles, with His people!' And again: 'Praise the Lord, all you

Gentiles! Laud Him, all you peoples!' And again, Isaiah says: 'There shall be a root of Jesse; and He who shall rise to reign over the Gentiles, in Him the Gentiles shall hope.'" (Romans 15:8-12)

Consider the way Jesus related to the Jewish religious leaders. He had times of hostile dialogue with them and there were times when the confrontation with them was intense. However, Jesus reached out to them and provided the example for Paul that he articulated in his great statement of his mission objectives when he wrote that he became a Jew to those who are Jews that he might save the Jews (1 Corinthians 9:19-22).

He may be suggesting that Jesus was motivated to spend so much time relating to these leaders who were responsible for the spiritual well being of the Jewish people because He had perfect understanding of what these prophets predicted. We should remember, however, that Paul is illustrating this profound and dynamic teaching about how disciples should resolve their problems but cherish their relationships with Christ and with one another.

Verse thirteen concludes this teaching and is actually a benediction which concludes the message of Paul to the Romans through this letter: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

Like the benediction with which he concluded the eleventh chapter (11:36), this benediction is one of the greatest verses in the all writings of this apostle. This would be a wonderful verse to share with those believers you know who are living with the undeniable reality of a malignancy, are losing, or have lost a loved one.

Hope is the conviction that something good exists in this world and one day we will find that good, or that something good

is going to happen to us. The Old Testament refers to this conviction as "seeing the good". (Psalm 34:12) At the conclusion of his great love chapter, Paul writes that there are three eternal values worth cultivating in this life: hope, faith and love. Without hesitation he pronounced that love is the greatest of these three eternal values.

Hope is an eternal value because it can lead us to faith. When faith is described at the beginning of what is known as the faith chapter of the Bible (Hebrews 11), we read that faith gives substance to our hope. If we have no evidence or reason to believe something in the good, we can merely hope it will happen. However, when we come to faith, when we believe that God is and that He rewards those who diligently seek Him, now we have a foundation under the good for which we hope.

We read in that same faith chapter that without faith we cannot come to God or please God but with faith we can come to God and please God (Hebrews 11:6). God plants hope in the hearts of human beings. His will is that our hope will lead us to redeeming faith in Christ. Hope then is something that leads us to something (faith) that leads us to God.

Love is not something that leads to something that leads to God. Paul pronounced love as the greatest of this trio of eternal values because God is love (1 John 4:8). When we experience the love of which Paul writes so eloquently, we are in relationship with God and God is in relationship with us (1 John 4:16).

These parallel teachings of Paul regarding hope should help us to appreciate this beautiful benediction: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." The power of the Holy Spirit is the Dynamic Who makes possible that peace and happiness that do not make good sense.

That same Spirit is the source of the love, which is the greatest thing in the world, according to Paul. This helps us to understand that love is the most important of these principles Paul shares with disciples who must learn how to deal with their differences and cherish their relationships, with Christ and one another.

He will now share some personal mission objectives with these disciples in Rome because he is recruiting them to help him fulfill his heavenly calling: "Now I myself am confident concerning you, my brethren, that you also are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able also to admonish one another. Nevertheless, brethren, I have written more boldly to you on some points, as reminding you, because of the grace given to me by God, that I might be a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit." (Romans 15:14-16)

Paul is now reflecting on what he has written in this letter. He expresses some positive reinforcement as he affirms his confidence in them and their capacity to obey and apply all that he has exhorted them to do in the preceding chapters.

He acknowledges some boldness in the way he has written to them and he reminds them, that even though he has a very intense burden for the Jews, he has been called and commissioned by Christ to bring many Gentiles to Christ, like these Roman disciples of Jesus to whom he is writing. He refers to his incredible ministry to the Gentile world beautifully when he writes that he is presenting those he has led to faith as an offering, acceptable to God and sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Paul follows this reflection with an amazing statement about how he has fulfilled the mission objective the risen Christ and the apostles assigned to him. He made the claim

before King Agrippa that he was not disobedient to the heavenly vision he had received from the risen Christ, which was to proclaim the Gospel before the Jews, kings and the Gentiles. (Acts 26:19, 20) He continues writing to these Romans:

"Therefore I have reason to glory in Christ Jesus in the things which pertain to God. For I will not dare to speak of any of those things which Christ has not accomplished through me, in word and deed, to make the Gentiles obedient - in mighty signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God, so that from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. And so I have made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation, but as it is written: 'To whom He was not announced, they shall see; and those who have not heard shall understand.'" (Romans 15:17-21)

Paul is making the claim here that if you drew a circle on a map from Jerusalem to a point in the center of Italy, there was no place within that circle that he had not preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He shows the heart of a true missionary when he declares that he does not want to preach the Gospel where the name of Christ is already known, because he does not want to build on another man's foundation.

The essence of these closing remarks of this great Apostle to the Gentiles is that he has the whole world on his heart because the whole world is on the heart of God. One more statement shows the extent of that heavenly vision: "For this reason I also have been much hindered from coming to you. But now no longer having a place in these parts (to preach), and having a great desire these many years to come to you, whenever I journey to Spain, I shall come to you. For I hope to see you on my journey, and to be helped on my way there by you, if first I may enjoy your company for a while." (22-24)

In the last chapters of the Book of Acts, Paul has the magnificent obsession to get to Rome. When he finally arrives there we almost have the impression that he has fulfilled his mission to the Gentiles because he has reached the capital of the world empire of Rome. However, in the statement above we realize that he had that obsession to reach Rome because he was counting on the Church of Rome to be a support base and a sending church that would make it possible for him to proclaim the Gospel on into Spain.

In several of his letters he mentions an offering he was gathering from Gentile churches he established in places like Philippi and Corinth, to relieve the suffering of Jewish believers in Jerusalem. He mentions that offering in these closing remarks to the disciples in Rome: "But now I am going to Jerusalem to minister to the saints. For it pleased those from Macedonia and Achaia to make a certain contribution for the poor among the saints who are in Jerusalem. It pleased them indeed, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have been partakers of their spiritual things, their duty is also to minister to them in material things. Therefore, when I have performed this and have sealed to them this fruit, I shall go by way of you to Spain." (25-28)

This great Apostle to the Gentiles never passes up an opportunity to remind the Gentiles that they are indebted to the Jews for spiritual things like the Scriptures and their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. It is beautiful to observe this apostle, who needed the intercession of Barnabas to gain acceptance from these Jewish disciples, who had good reason to fear this man who as Saul of Tarsus had led severe persecutions against the church in Jerusalem (Acts 9:26, 27).

Paul writes another beautiful claim regarding his anticipated visit to Rome and these disciples in the church

there: "But I know that when I come to you, I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of the gospel of Christ." (Romans 15:29)

He has already written that he hopes to impart some spiritual gifts to them and be blessed by receiving blessings from them (1:11). What does he now mean by coming to them in the fullness of the blessing of the Gospel? He answers that question when he writes to the Corinthians and explains the way he came into the city of Corinth: "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

His arrival in Rome was similar to what he wrote to the Corinthians. When he arrived in Rome he was actually a prisoner of Rome. He had come through a harrowing journey by sea, which is recorded in great detail in the last two chapters of the Book of Acts. He is met by some of these believers in Rome to whom he has written this letter, who had traveled some distance to meet Paul and be with him (Acts 28:15). If you had been one of these disciples in Rome who had received the original version of this theological masterpiece, would you have considered it a privilege to meet the author?

Before writing his personal greetings in the sixteenth chapter, his closing words to the disciples in Rome are: "Now I beg you, brethren, through the Lord Jesus Christ, and through the love of the Spirit, that you strive together with me in prayers to God for me, that I may be delivered from those in

Judea who do not believe, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, that I may come to you with joy by the will of God, and may be refreshed together with you. Now the God of peace be with you all. Amen." (Romans 15:30-33)

Paul has good reason to fear the Jews in Jerusalem and Judea who do not believe. According to the inspired history book of the New Testament Church, when he arrived in Jerusalem, he did experience severe persecution, which resulted in the imprisonment he was experiencing when he traveled to Rome, with his transportation furnished and paid for by the Roman government. (Acts 20 - 28)

Epilogue

"Meet the Church"

(16:1-27)

Since there are more than fifty people mentioned by name in the Book of Acts, when we read the inspired history of the New Testament Church, we realize that the Church of Jesus Christ is not buildings, but people. (There are no church buildings in the first three hundred years of church history.) These are real people who have all the problems, challenges and obstacles to faith many of us face every day.

The only inspired book of church history and church history textbooks tell us that people are the vehicles through whom the risen, living Christ builds His Church and discipled this world of hurting and sometimes hostile people, who desperately need to hear the Gospel of Jesus Christ. As we learned while we were considering Abraham, when God wants to communicate a great idea, He packages that idea in people. Collectively, the people

through whom God has been and is working today proclaim this message: "God is not looking for super people through whom He can work. God delights in doing extraordinary things through very ordinary people."

We find this truth proclaimed all the way through the Bible, and that is also the message conveyed through the final chapter of this letter. This epilogue to the awesome teaching of Paul - which is a bundle of multiple greetings - is all about people. In the first twenty-four verses of this chapter Paul names thirty-three people. Twenty-four of them are in Rome - seventeen men and seven women - even though he had never visited the city of Rome when he wrote this letter from Corinth.

Today we can fly in one hour between these cities that required weeks of travel for Paul and the early church. Yet it is amazing how much those who lived in the first century traveled between these countries and cities of the Roman Empire. This chapter is an evidence of how much those people must have traveled.

One explanation for this extensive travel was an extraordinary network of roads that were built by the Romans. Through archeology I have personally seen the amazing evidences of the incredible building skills of the Roman Empire. We have learned that Rome provided Paul's transportation from Jerusalem to the capital of the world. In the providence of God, this amazing network of Roman roads provided a way of transportation on which the early church traveled as they obeyed the Great Commission of their Lord.

In the first twenty-four verses of this chapter, Paul names thirty-three people - seventeen men and seven women. The chapter divides into three sections: In the first sixteen verses he greets those in Rome who were his friends whom he had met elsewhere in his travels. They eventually found their way to

Rome and became part of the church in that city. Then after some warnings about believers who cause dissensions and divisions in the church in the second section (17-20), in the third section (21-23) he writes greetings from nine people who were with him in Corinth when he wrote this letter - eight men and one woman. He also writes about two households - which were obviously house churches - two unnamed mothers and several unnamed men.

The woman who was among those who were with him when he wrote this letter from Corinth was named Phoebe. She was from Cenchrea, which was the port of Corinth about nine miles east of the city. She was a traveling businesswoman who actually delivered this letter to Rome from Corinth for the Apostle Paul. We read: "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of from you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also." (1, 2)

Paul describes Phoebe as a servant of the church in Cenchrea. The word "servant" is the Greek word for "deacon". This Greek word is the same for men or women. When the church assigned a responsibility to a man or woman, that believer was called a "servant" or a "deacon". An elder was a shepherd, or an overseer who with other elders presided over in the New Testament Church. Anyone who had been given assigned work in the church, like those who served tables in the early days after Pentecost, were called servants or deacons (Acts 6:2-6).

Phoebe was given the assignment of making the long journey from Corinth to Rome to deliver this masterpiece of the Apostle Paul. Many people think Paul was a hopeless male supremacy advocate who put women down and had a terrible bias against women. Pharisees in those days thanked God every morning that

they were not a Gentile or a woman. If you consider the culture of the day and the values Paul inherited being raised as a Pharisee, you will realize that Paul was far beyond his time. And as a former Pharisee of the Pharisees, he was revolutionary in his teaching and his attitude toward women.

He did not teach that men and women have an equal role and function in life. But, he did teach that men should love their wives and give themselves for their wives, as Christ loved the Church when He gave His life for the Church (Ephesians 5:25). As he does in this chapter, Paul mentions many women in his letters who labored with him in his extraordinary missionary ministry, according to the cluster of spiritual gifts they were given by the Holy Spirit. A careful study of the women Paul names in his letters as being faithful co-laborers with him will show you that these women were deacons, teachers and evangelists as they labored with this apostle. He is following the example of his Lord because we can find similar references in the Gospels to women who labored with Jesus in His ministry.

Imagine how much they would have valued this theological masterpiece when he had finished writing it. He places this valuable letter in the hands of Phoebe and gives her the responsibility of walking this letter all the way from Corinth to Rome. He writes: "She has been a helper of many and of myself also." Scholars believe there is strong evidence that she was an evangelist and teacher with Paul in his missionary ministry. Phoebe is only one example of many women who were given important assignments by this great apostle.

He begins his personal greetings by recognizing a wonderful husband and wife team who had served with him, risked their lives for him and were greatly loved by him: "Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also

all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house." (3-5)

We learn from the eighteenth chapter of Acts that Paul met these two Jewish tentmakers in Corinth. Luke, the author of the history book of the New Testament, tells us they were driven out of Rome when the Emperor Claudius issued a decree forcing all Jews to leave the capital of the Roman Empire. Paul refused to let the carnal Corinthians support him financially, so he made tents with this Jewish couple. He went into business with them because he also was a tentmaker. He actually moved in with them and soon led them to Christ. They became precious friends and their home became the first of many house churches in the city of Corinth.

After spending two years in Corinth, when Paul traveled to the great city of Ephesus, he took this dear Jewish couple with him. Again they had a church in their house (1 Corinthians 16:19). Of the six times their names are mentioned in the New Testament, four times Priscilla's name is mentioned first. This probably means that she was the teacher in that church that met in their house.

Like Paul they also ministered to Jews in the synagogues because we read that one morning they heard a powerful, eloquent and brilliant young man named, Apollos proclaiming the Gospel in the synagogue. They perceived that he did not fully understand the Gospel. They invited him to their home and more fully instructed him in the Gospel. As a result of this mentoring, we read that Apollos moved back to Corinth and had a mighty ministry there with Peter and others who followed Paul and built on his teaching ministry in that city (1 Corinthians 3:12-15).

It was while Priscilla and Aquila were with Paul in Ephesus that they risked their necks for Paul. His three years of ministry in Ephesus ended abruptly when the entire city rioted

and Paul had to flee for his life (Acts 19:23-20:1). Paul referred to people who risked their lives for Christ with him as "fellow soldiers." (Philippians 2:25)

We realize these two soldiers risked their lives for Christ again when we now read that they are among those greeted by Paul in Rome, the city from which they were driven earlier by that terrible edict of the Emperor Claudius.

We then read: "Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the first fruits of Achaia to Christ. Greet Mary, who labored much for us. Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me." (5-7)

When Paul entered a new area like Asia, of which Ephesus was the capital city, he was always praying that the same Holy Spirit that blessed his ministry in difficult places like Corinth would bless him in that next country or continent. He therefore never forgot the first convert who demonstrated the miracle that God was with him. That is why he could not forget Epaenetus.

Paul literally describes this Mary as "Mary the toiler." She had what Paul labels as the gift of "helps". (1 Corinthians 12:28) Every ministry depends on people who have these practical help gifts and the ministry of Paul was no exception to that practical fact of spiritual community, which one of my favorite mentors called "Body Life."

Andronicus and Junia are described as countrymen in this translation, but the original language describes them as relatives of Paul. The fact that they were in Christ before Paul means that they probably prayed much for him when he was leading severe persecution against the believers in Jerusalem. How it must have angered Saul of Tarsus to know that two of his relatives had become followers of this heresy he hated so much.

Perhaps eternity will reveal that their prayers were part of the miracle that brought their extraordinary relative to Christ.

Paul also writes that they have shared a prison experience together and that these two are highly regarded by the apostles. He feels very close to these people because they are not only relatives but fellow soldiers because a prison experience in that Roman culture was a life threatening experience and would knit their hearts together forever. One letter in the name "Junia" can determine the gender of this person. These relatives of Paul may have been a couple, or a brother and a sister who were very precious to him.

As these greetings to those Paul knew in Rome continue, scholars can tell us fascinating information about each name listed by Paul. To summarize these scholarly insights, some of these members of the Church in Rome are slaves while some are highly placed in the social and political strata of Rome. One is a relative of Herod and also another relative of Paul's (Romans 16:8-11).

He greets several hard-working women in verses twelve and thirteen: "Greet Tryphena and Tryphosa, who have labored in the Lord. Greet the beloved Persis, who labored much in the Lord. Greet Rufus, chosen in the Lord, and his mother and mine." (12, 13)

Tryphena and Tryphosa have names that suggest they are "dainty" and "delicate" and yet they worked very hard for the Lord. Their names also imply that they were born in a high class of society in Rome and were aristocrats. These fragile and cultured women, who did not have to work for a living, work very hard for the Lord. We know nothing of Persis except that she was another woman who worked hard in the work of the Lord with Paul somewhere in the Roman Empire.

The mother of Rufus was also like a mother to Paul. Since Paul was a widower and in poor health, he needed the fulfillment of a promise of Jesus that those who follow Him will receive fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters who will be closer to them than their biological families (Mark 10:29, 30). Women like the mother of Rufus and possibly Priscilla and Aquila contributed to the inspired counsel of Paul to his son in the faith, Timothy that in the church we should consider all the older women as mothers, and the older men as fathers (I Timothy 5:2).

He then greets a group of men with Greek names who were Greek businessmen who apparently moved to Rome together and had a house church in this capital city of the Empire: "Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermas, Patrobas, Hermes, and the brethren who are with them." (14)

The final greeting to his friends in Rome is addressed to what was probably another house church: "Greet Philologus and Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them." (15)

This is followed by a benediction on all these friends and relatives Paul knew in Rome: "Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you." (16)

He interrupts his greetings to issue a warning regarding those who are not authentic believers but profess to be disciples of Jesus (17-20). Jesus predicted in his Parable of the Wheat and the Tares and by the way He concluded His Sermon on the Mount that we can expect the evil one to attack the church from within in this way (Matthew 13:24-30; 37-40; 7:24-27). All the inspired New Testament letters of apostles and others address these problems. The advice of the Apostle Paul is to ignore those who cause nothing but division and dissension in the Church at Rome.

He then sends greetings from the eight men who are with him as he writes this letter in Corinth: "Timothy, my fellow worker, and Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, my countrymen, greet you. I, Tertius, who wrote this epistle, greet you in the Lord. Gaius, my host and the host of the whole church, greets you. Erastus, the treasurer of the city, greets you, and Quartus, a brother. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." (Romans 16:21-24)

This also gives us an insight into the New Testament Church. Timothy is with Paul as his son in faith and ministry. "Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, my countrymen," are also his relatives. He is now about to write the last words of this letter. As his custom was, Paul will write some closing words himself. Before he does that, he tells Tertius, who has written this letter as Paul has dictated it to him, to write a line of personal greeting himself.

We know that Tertius was a slave because his name means "Third". Like prisoners in a penitentiary, slaves were stripped of their personal identities. They were sometimes given numbers in a household rather than names. Quartus, the brother who is mentioned in verse twenty-three, is also a slave because his name means "Fourth". When the Roman Empire conquered the Greek world empire, the Greeks they made their slaves were often more educated than the Roman conquerors. These were probably two of those educated slaves who were often assigned the responsibility of educating children in Roman households.

Then there was Erastus, who was the treasurer of the city of Corinth and Gaius, who is described as the host of the Apostle Paul. He is also described as the man who welcomes the entire church of Corinth into his large home when the many small house churches need to have a large gathering (23).

This capsule portrait of the eight men who were with Paul while he wrote this amazing letter shows us how the entire Greek Corinthian culture, from top to the bottom was represented in those eight men. When you study the thirty-three names in these greetings of Paul, you realize that what was true of that group of men in Corinth, was also true of the twenty-four people Paul names who were part of the church in Rome.

Scholars like the late William Barclay of Edinburgh University in Scotland give us a wealth of information about these thirty-three people. If you read his commentary on this chapter of Romans, you will realize that the Church in Rome also represented the Roman culture from top to bottom, from royalty to slave, from rich to poor.

Since the church represented every kind of person in the culture, each person reached their peers and the church reproduced like the creation: each after his or her kind. In places like Rome and Corinth this was the method used for evangelism by New Testament churches. They learned this from Jesus. He chose twelve men who were very different. They represented the different kinds of people in their culture. They reached those different kinds of people as they made disciples all over the world for Jesus.

The essence of the Great Commission was and is to make disciples (Matthew 28:18-20). While we are grateful for opportunities to make disciples through media and large meetings, we must never let these methods replace the basic method of these first generation churches: each one, reach one and teach one. The mentoring role of Priscilla and Aquila in the life and ministry of Apollos, and of Paul in the life and ministry of Timothy are a critical dimension of the disciple making method that multiplied disciples in the early church.

The final words of Paul to the disciples of Jesus in Rome: "Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith - to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen." (Romans 16:25-27)

The other letters of Paul average eighteen hundred words. In this letter he has used more than seventy one hundred words. Paul closes this magnificent letter to the Romans with yet another benediction. In this benediction he invokes the blessing of God Who alone can establish these Roman disciples: His closing benediction is according to four miracles: (1) according to the Gospel he has presented so comprehensively in this theological masterpiece, (2) according to the revelation of the mystery that has been kept secret since the world began but has been revealed by the prophetic Scriptures, (3) according to the Great Commission that was given for obedience to the faith, and (4) according to the glory of God through Jesus Christ forever.

It was the objective and burden of Paul when he wrote this letter that disciples of Jesus would be established through his preaching of Christ in this presentation of the Gospel, which has been referred to as "The Doctrinal Constitution or Foundation of the Church." To be established in the salvation Jesus Christ brought to this world and to your life, you should study this letter until you can think your way through the teaching of this Gospel presentation without opening your Bible. This theological statement of the New Testament Church will show you how to be saved and how to be established and live like a saved person.

The mystery of which he writes in this benediction is the miracle that God has always intended to save both Jews and Gentiles. The mystery really is Christ Himself: "Great is the mystery of godliness; God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory." (1 Timothy 3:16)

Writing to Gentile believers he tells these Romans, the Ephesians, and the Colossians that this mystery is Christ living in them. To the Colossians he writes: "... This is the mystery: that Christ in your hearts is your only hope." (1:27)

(Romans 16:25a, 26; 11:25, 26; Ephesians 3:2-6; Colossians 1:24-27)

Personal Application

At the beginning of this series, in my overview of this letter of Paul to the Romans, I challenged you to pray that God would speak to you while you are studying this book. I trust you have heard Him and accepted His offer of grace and mercy. Anyone who believes in salvation by works must answer at least three questions: How do you know when you have done enough good works to be saved? How can you ever be sure of your salvation, and if you could save yourself by your good works, why did Jesus die on the cross? From studying the Book of Romans, are you now ready to believe God and be justified, by faith?

If so, I invite you to pray - talk to God, as I did years ago: "Loving heavenly Father, I confess that I am a sinner and I trust Your Son, Jesus Christ, to be my Savior. I place my complete trust in His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead for the forgiveness of every one of my sins. I now forsake and turn away from all my sins. I want to reconcile my divorce from You. Right here and right now, I declare by faith

that Jesus Christ is my Lord and my Savior, and I surrender my life, unconditionally, to His control and direction. Bring my life into perfect alignment with that great design You have always willed for my life. Help me as I follow Your Son, Jesus Christ, to rely on His power and authority and to live to exalt Him, and for Your glory. Thank You for providing this great and eternal salvation for me. Amen.”

If you have prayed this prayer, I invite you to write us and let us know and then become involved in a local church that believes and teaches the Word of God.

If you have already believed God and are a follower of Christ, I challenge you to be like Paul and share what you have learned from his letter to the Romans. Share this Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone that they can also be declared righteous and enjoy eternal peace with God by His grace through faith.