

# *Paul to the Roman House Churches*

**WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY**

**10<sup>th</sup>** in a fourteen-part series

October 23, 2022

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*Romans 12:1–21 (NRSV)*

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

<sup>3</sup>For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. <sup>4</sup>For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, <sup>5</sup>so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. <sup>6</sup>We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; <sup>7</sup>ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; <sup>8</sup>the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.

<sup>9</sup>Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup>love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup>Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup>Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup>Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup>Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” <sup>20</sup>No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

*Ephesians 4:13b–16a (NRSV)*

<sup>14</sup>We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people’s trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. <sup>15</sup>But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,

*Paul writes a letter to the believers in Rome, even though he has never been there.*

Romans, written in 55-56AD, is a letter from the apostle Paul to the house churches in Rome. All Jews, including those Jews who had become Christians, had been expelled from Rome about five years before. Jewish Christians were now returning to Rome, only to find out that the Gentile (non-Jewish) Christians were running the show! In this letter, Paul urges harmony and unity, reminding those Christians who had been Gentiles that the Jews were the root of the Christian tree and reminding the Jews who were now Christians that God’s salvation is for all people. There is one people of God and one faith.

*What love looks like*

Reading through Paul’s letter to the Romans, many people see a marked turn in Romans 12. But it is not the turn people often think is taken. Some contrast Paul’s “theology” (Chapters 1-11) with his “ethics” (Chapters 12-16), perhaps describing it as “belief” and “practice.” But this does Paul a disservice. There can be no such separation for Paul or for us. What we “believe” and what we “do” are woven together and cannot be pulled apart. Both the intellectually minded and the ever-practical find it more

comfortable to put belief and practice in two separate boxes, but, as N.T. Wright aptly notes, it is like trying to separate our blood and our breath.

Romans 1-11 takes us up a mountain, showing us that God's faithfulness to the covenant made with Abraham and the Israelites has been brought to its fulfillment in Jesus Christ. And with Jesus' arrival nothing can ever be the same. Creation and humanity have been remade, even as we await this re-creation's final consummation.

In Romans 12, Paul begins to show us, concretely, what this re-creation looks like. We are transformed by the renewing of our minds, so that we may see clearly what is "good and acceptable and perfect," so that we can imaginatively comprehend and embrace the will of God (12:2). This renewing does not take place in isolation, but in relationship within community. Our reshaping plays out differently from person to person, but all of it is given to us for the building up of the community (12:3-8).

And what does this renewing look like? It looks like love. And what does love look like? Love is genuine, coming from the center of ourselves. It can't be faked. Love is sacrificial. It is mutual. It is being willing to play second fiddle. Love is taking care of those who need us or are simply in need. We laugh with our friends when they laugh and we cry with them when they mourn. Read Romans 12:9-18. Read it in different translations. Try reading it less as a series of exhortations and more as a description, an imaginative description of the renewed mind living with others, including even those who are hostile to us or to the Gospel of Christ.

It is always worth remembering that the NT word for love is nearly always the Greek, *agape*. In Greek usage, it was a colorless, empty word, waiting to be filled with meaning and Paul doesn't hesitate to fill it right up. All understandings of love that exclude God are mere distortions of the real thing. Thus, Paul tells the Christians in Rome that they are to love but then has to tell them exactly what genuine God-given love looks like, so that they can despise what is evil and hold on to what is good (12:9).

All this takes more imagination than we think. The world wants to teach us about love, to conform us to its ways. In the memorable words of J.B. Phillips, the world wants to squeeze us into its mold. So we must train ourselves to recognize the face of Christian love. This training has the aim of transforming us, maturing us, so that we can be the people God created us to be.

### *Transformation*

In his letters, Paul does not concentrate on Jesus' teachings but on the implications of what Jesus has *accomplished*. And what Jesus has accomplished is so profound, so creation-remaking that the only proper response is to offer ourselves, our entire beings, as a living sacrifice, for God has demonstrated that he is worthy of nothing less (v. 1). We can never stay as we once were. Our commitment to Christ demands nothing less than our transformation, the complete and utter renewing of our minds such that our *thoughts, feelings, and actions* are conformed to the ways of God. It is the marriage of what we believe about God with how we live with God, the joining of biblical theology and holy living.

How does this transformation happen? How do we "grow up in every way . . . into Christ" (Ephesians 4:15)? It seems, well, impossible so much of the time. There is so much in me that needs transforming. How can I put to death the old self (the living sacrifice) and put on the new self (the renewing of the mind)? Only by the grace of God. This renewing of the mind is the work of God's Holy Spirit (see Romans 8:5-9). If it were up to us alone we couldn't get there. Make a trip to Barnes and Noble and count the self-help books. Many of these are filled with excellent advice. The problem is that we just don't actually do much of it. No, only by grace can we ever hope to live a holy life.

For, who wants to be called a baby? When I was in elementary school, those were fighting words. But that is pretty much how Paul sees the Christians in Ephesus. He

pulls the punch just a bit by saying “we must no longer be children, tossed to and fro” (Ephesians 4:14) but the sharp point still hits home. To the Christians in Corinth, Paul wrote “And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as a spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as *infants in Christ*. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, for you are still of the flesh” (1 Cor.3:1-3). No punches pulled there.

Is Paul *trying* to be insulting? I don’t know whether Paul was going for a little shock value or not, but his point was well taken. These Christians were infants in the faith, Christian novices, fresh enlistees in the body of Christ. Now Paul doesn’t call the Colossian Christians infants or children, but he says that he prays for their growth, that they will “produce fruit in every good work and grow in the knowledge of God” (Col 1:10). He knows how far these new believers have to go on their journey to a deeper faith.

When we read Paul’s letters in the New Testament we have to remember that they are largely letters written to small, emerging communities of faith that he himself had founded only a few years before. He is their “senior pastor,” writing to his churches to provide guidance, to settle disputes, to teach, to encourage, and to otherwise help these new colonies of God’s re-born people grow toward Christian maturity.

Just try to imagine the journey that lay ahead of these Christians. There were no churches for them to grow up in. No parents or grandparents to turn to. No theological libraries or seminaries. No Bibles. Only this strange Good News about a God who gets himself crucified by the Romans. They were asked to give up their belief in the existence of many gods and embrace the Jewish claim that there was only one God. Their embrace of Christ often meant ostracism from their families and friends, for already there were nasty rumors about these followers of Christ, including gruesome whispers of their gathering to eat Jesus’ body and drink his blood.

They had as much to “unlearn” as to learn, as they grew into ever-truer disciples of Christ. In this, we are like them, for nearly all of us carry around unquestioned but misleading assumptions about the Christian proclamation. We think we understand and then are surprised by how much we have to learn and “unlearn,” how much our minds must be renewed if we are to be transformed.

### *Getting to the truth*

This organic connection between what we know about God and how we live with God, depends on our making our way ever closer to the truth about God. But how do we do that? How do we arrive at a trustworthy core of beliefs about the God with whom we live?

With other Methodists, we affirm that Scripture is the primary criterion of what we believe, the measure against which all claims are judged. But we recognize that we learn about God also by listening to those who have come before us, by seeking to understand our own experience with God and others, and by learning to think well, using our mind as well as our heart.

We are Methodists because we do not desire to be like children, tossed here and there by the latest Jesus fads. Instead, we pray that by “speaking the truth in love,” we will “grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.” We seek the “renewing of our minds” so that we can “discern what is the will of God,” so that we can grow into “maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ.” May we all embrace a calling to be spiritual theologians. And so we practice and practice some more. Each day we strive to grow in knowledge and in love, so that we might be ever more like Jesus.

## Our Heritage of Respect for Learning

The people of God have always had a deep and abiding respect for learning. We usually think of God's Old Testament law as an extended and burdensome list of detailed rules. However, "instruction" is a better way to think of God's law, for the Law told the Israelites how they were to live in relationship with God – what a wondrous thing to be told! So, we shouldn't be surprised when the Psalmist says, "I told you my plans, and you answered. Now teach me your principles. Help me understand the meaning of your commandments, and I will meditate on your wonderful miracles" (Psalm 119:26-27 NLT). The book of Proverbs is, in essence, the lived experience of the Jewish community of learning to walk in God's ways. The Jews understood that they had to teach their children the story of Israel and its God. What does it mean to be Israel? Why do we live the way we live and do what we do?<sup>1</sup> Given their heritage of devotion to God's word and the importance of learning, it is not surprising that the study of Torah replaced the temple as the center of Jewish religious practices after the destruction of the temple in 70AD.

The apostles and early Christians were no less committed to learning and study. Timothy was told to "continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ" (2 Tim 3:14-15). Peter urged that Christians "long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation" (1 Pet 2:2).

In John 8, Jesus tells believers, "If you truly continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (v.31-32). What does Jesus mean by "continue?" It might be translated "stay in" or "dwell." Dallas Willard writes that continuing/dwelling in Jesus' word means focusing on the good news of God's kingdom and devoting ourselves to Jesus' teaching through both private study and public instruction. This is not occasional dabbling in God's word, but dwelling there, being thoughtfully serious, devoting regular time and effort, and asking God to open our heart and mind to his word.<sup>2</sup>

At St. Andrew, we are striving to help all of us to become more knowledgeable and confident in our understanding and use of the Bible. This is crucial because, with other Methodists, the conviction that the Bible must be our primary doctrinal source and guide for living the life to which we have been called. Though a well-educated Oxford man, John Wesley considered himself to be a "man of one book," the Bible. We are called to be a people of that book. In its pages, we learn of God's hopes for us and expectations of us. In its pages, we confront the living Lord and learn of his love for us. In its pages, we learn how to live the sort of life that God intended for us. Indeed, William Willimon reminds us that "a congregation is Christian to the degree that it is confronted by and attempts to form its life in response to the Word of God."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>from Brueggeman, Walter. "Passion and Perspective: Two dimensions of education in the Bible." *Theology Today*, 1985

<sup>2</sup>from Dallas Willard's, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our hidden life in God*. 1998. San Francisco: HarperCollins

## Scott Engle's Bible Classes

### Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *We will begin 1 Thessalonians on Nov 7*

- Note: *We will not meet on Oct 24 & 31*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

## **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *1 Corinthians*

- *Note: We will not meet on Oct 25 & Nov 1*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

### *About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

## **Scott's Sunday Class**

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

**Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel.** Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.