Walking the Way of the Cross with Paul

SESSION 6

> *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." (Romans 12:2)*

Introduction

For Paul, the fact that God's Messiah had been crucified overturned much of what had previously seemed normal and right. Power and wisdom, God's ways and God's desires, took on new definitions, new meanings, and new shapes. "In Christ," in fact, there was a new creation for believers. The old world of the self-centered *flesh* was giving way to the long-hoped-for restoration of justice and righteousness under the rule of God. The Spirit of God was initiating this new creation in Christians' hearts and lives as they shared in the cross of Christ, crucified to the flesh and the world, with the self-giving love of the crucified Messiah as their pattern.

"It all sounds very exciting," we might be tempted to say, "but where are the details?" What *exactly* does being "crucified to the world" look like? How does the "fruit of the Spirit" work out day by day?

The early Christians themselves had to address those very questions. It is one thing to join a new religious movement. It is something else to wake up the next morning and say, "Wait a minute. . . . What do I do now?" The new movement had no shortage of resources to draw on. Judaism had the Scriptures and centuries of wisdom about life centered on the one true God. Greek philosophers had also thought for hundreds of years about the best way for humans to live. Christians made ample use of these assets but modified what they found there due to several key factors. The cross of Jesus the Messiah stood as the ultimate criterion for testing existing ethical traditions. His teaching was also remembered, and often it too pointed toward the cross. The Holy Spirit was active in Christian communities, stirring up new ideas and new interpretations of old ones and inspiring new patterns of faithfulness.

The *difference* of Christian life from the surrounding world—its "nonconformity"—is a crucial feature of New Testament teaching.

In this atmosphere, traditions of Christian ethical teaching began springing up, shared orally by traveling teachers without much systematic organization. Paul was part of this process. He owed a debt to the tradition of teaching before him, and his own teaching made its contribution to the development of Christian instruction. We see this clearly in Romans 12–14, where Paul counsels and exhorts his audience on specific aspects of Christian conduct, moving from topic to topic in a seemingly haphazard fashion. We will look at three aspects of his teaching here: personal relations, relations with the larger society, and relations within the church. But we begin with the heading that Paul put over it all.

The Renewing of Your Minds

Right at the beginning (Rom. 12:1–2), Paul provides a theological basis for his ethical counsel: "the mercies of

God." "The righteousness of God" or "the holiness of God" might seem more obvious starting points, but whether consciously or not, Paul is echoing the teaching of Jesus here. At the core of Jesus' ethical teaching are the words, "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). This seems to be an intentional revision of the Holiness Code of the book of Leviticus, which says, "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev. 19:2b and many other places). By replacing "holy" with "merciful," Jesus turned this biblical tradition in a new direction. The only verse he quotes from the Holiness Code is Leviticus 19:18b: "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Paul also makes God's mercies the opening note of his ethical exhortation, and we will see that love is its central theme.

Paul also includes two other ideas at the beginning of Romans 12: transformation and renewal. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds." The behavior of those who live in the new creation will follow a new pattern. The *difference* of Christian life from the surrounding world—its "nonconformity"—is a crucial feature of New Testament teaching. Every society wants its members to "fit in," and most people are eager to do so. That makes the nonconformity that Paul urges a discomforting factor for Christians who take their spiritual identities seriously.

This nonconformity is not just "being different," however; it is not simply the opposite of "this world." Being nonconformed starts with the interior, not the exterior; it begins with being *transformed* through inner renewal. But where does the new creation's mental renewal come from? Not from study (I'm sorry to say). "What is good and acceptable and perfect" had been the subject of study and debate by philosophers for ages, but Paul does not point that way. We have seen that he connects new creation with the crucified Messiah (2 Cor. 5:14–17; Gal. 6:14–15), and one source of inner renewal is participation in his cross, being "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:19–20; see session 4). But Paul also associates transformation with the Holy Spirit. Earlier in Romans he contrasts the mind that is set on the Spirit with the mind set on the flesh (Rom. 8:5–7). The "renewing of your minds," then, is an activity of the Spirit. It does not come from applying ourselves to new ideas but from opening ourselves to the work of the Spirit and the influence of the cross on our thinking.

The details of Christian life that are laid out in Romans 12–14 all spring from the basic idea that in the new creation God's Spirit brings new ways of responding to human life, and that those new responses are patterned on the self-giving love of the crucified Messiah. Scripture emphasizes the central role of love: love is the first item of the harvest of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22–23); Christ's death for all is the result of his love (2 Cor. 5:14); and Paul's opening appeals to "the mercies of God" (Rom. 12:1). For Paul, as for Jesus, part of the newness, the difference, of the reign of God is love for other people that is rooted in God's own mercy and compassion.

Personal Relations

Since the organization of Romans 12–14 is not entirely clear, we will look at it under three topics, two of which contain material from more than one chapter. Please begin by reading Romans 12:9-21; 13:8–14.

The call for genuine love (12:9–10) not only sets the theme for a section on relations among individual believers but also sums up Paul's opening reflections on unity and diversity in the church (see below). All the advice that follows, on a variety of subjects, is based on love. Some of it seems obvious ("be patient in suffering"). Some of it is deeper and more difficult than it looks. "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" sounds self-evident. But don't we often try to "cheer up" people when we should just sit and grieve with them? Doesn't jealousy or disappointment often keep us from sharing someone's joy?

Toward the end of Romans 12, Paul once again seems to draw on oral traditions that originated with Jesus. "Bless those who persecute you. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil" reminds us of Jesus' teaching on love for enemies in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:38–48; see also Luke 6:27–36). In the background stands the cross: Jesus' teaching led him there, and Paul's teaching follows from it. Loving enemies is surely being not "conformed to this world"; and minds transformed and renewed by the Spirit of Jesus look to "overcome evil with good."

The theme of love is picked up again in Romans 13:8–10, again with echoes of Jesus: "The commandments . . . are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" These words remind us how Jesus identified the two greatest commandments (Mark 12:28–34). At the end of this section, though, Paul sounds more like himself, with a list of behaviors to avoid and a directive to "make no provision for the flesh," but to "put on the

Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 13:14). "Putting on Christ" is language from early Christian baptisms (Gal. 3:27), but it also reminds us of Paul's declaration that "I have been crucified with Christ . . . it is Christ who lives in me (Gal. 2:19b–20a). The variety of ethical teachings in Romans 12 and 13, all centered on love, lay out the details of what it means to be crucified with the Messiah and have him living within.

Relations with the Larger Society

In the midst of these directions focused primarily on relations among believers, Paul turns his attention to the world to which they are not to be conformed, specifically, "the governing authorities," meaning the Roman Emperor as well as local rulers. Please read Romans 13:1–7.

Paul's basic advice here is for believers to accept subordination to ruling authorities, but this advice must be read in its context, both in the letter and in ancient history. First, there is a common (if somewhat cynical) principle in biblical studies that suggests that if a writer says not to do something, someone is probably doing it. If Paul had to tell readers to be subordinate to government, there may have been a streak of resistance to authority in the early church. More certainly, *Paul himself*, according to early church tradition, was slain by the sword that "the authority" bore "to execute wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4).

Changes in how we look at the world, what we value, and how we live always involve the death of some part of our identity and our desires.

There is more than a little irony here. It seems that however earnestly an early Christian teacher encouraged believers to obey Rome, he could still be put to death. The literary context of Romans 13:1–7 accords with this. Paul has just finished telling his readers to bless those who persecute them and do good to their enemies—enemies that seemingly included the governing authorities. Government persecution of Christians was uncommon in the first century, but it was a possibility, and Paul calls for a response to it in keeping with the crucified Jesus. Doing good should leave people with no fear of the authorities (Rom. 13:3), but if even that was not good enough, then the teaching of Romans 12 comes into play.

One last piece of historical context: Romans 13:1–7 is not advice on good citizenship. According to Acts 16:37–39; 22:25–29, Paul was a Roman citizen, but most Christians were not. Full Roman citizenship belonged to free men born in the city of Rome and was granted, under special circumstances, to only a few others. Most people in the Roman Empire were not Roman citizens. Even Paul's Roman readers were not all citizens.[1] Unlike Christians today who are often citizens of countries where Christianity has long been prominent, Paul's readers belonged to a tiny upstart movement that held a very slippery position in Roman society. Romans 13:1–7 is advice to a group of outsiders meant to keep them alive, at least, and out of serious danger.

Relations within the Church

Paul actually begins his long section of ethical exhortation with words directed not just at individual conduct but at relations within the Christian community. Please read Romans 12:3–8.

Two things that Paul consistently recognizes about the church are that all its activities are gifts from God and that these gifts are diverse and all deserve respect. The "gifts of the Spirit" in Romans 12:6–8; 1 Corinthians 12:8–10, 28–30; and Ephesians 4:11 all differ because they are not attempts to write out a definitive list of what the Spirit does and does not do in the churches. Rather, Paul believed that *whatever* actions were done for the work of God through the people of God were actions done at God's impulse. He highlighted different sets of activities in different contexts.[2]

Because it is God's grace that brings about all these activities (including Paul's own!), no one has a right to rate his or her work more highly than anyone else's. Whether it is apostleship or prophecy, leadership or simple compassion, each has its place in the Christian body. Whatever our patterns of institutional organization for the church may be, Paul's concept of gifts of grace always calls us back toward equality and mutual respect. In this conception, a poor parishioner who visits the sick would be on the same level as a

bishop or other authority figure. The exhortations to love that follow in Romans 12:9–10 point to the basis for this vision of equality. Where there is genuine love and mutual affection, and a greater desire to give honor than to receive it, we will recognize one another's gifts and one another's importance for the whole body.

This same vision of equality within diversity underlies Paul's exhortation in Romans 14 (and the first few verses of chapter 15). The issues here partially resemble those in 1 Corinthians 8–10, though they may have a different origin. As in 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of certain people as "weak" because they have more sensitive consciences with regard to particular issues. This is not meant in a belittling way, although Paul himself identified with the "strong" (Rom. 15:1). Though he was "persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself" (14:14, an astonishing statement for a former Pharisee), Paul still upheld the right of each believer to act in accordance with her or his own conscience. Some lived in at least partial observance of Jewish food laws and holy days (including the Sabbath); others did not. Paul saw all of them as acting "in honor of the Lord" (14:6). Therefore they should respect one another's choices, "for God has welcomed them" (14:3). With the Lord at the center of their lives (14:8), believers can look on one another's lifestyle choices with calm acceptance, acknowledging the sincerity of other people's commitments to Christ even if they cannot follow the same path.

In an era when congregations and denominations are being torn apart by dissension over serious issues of belief and identity, particularly regarding sexuality, these often-overlooked words of Paul have a startling freshness. Jewish dietary principles and Sabbath observance were weighty matters for those who desired not to be "conformed to this world." These observances were clearly ordained not only by religious tradition but also by Scripture. The diversity of Jew and Gentile in the growing Christian movement made conflict over these choices inevitable. Paul's insistence that this diversity was not only a good thing but *the will of God* should cause us to look again at where we draw our lines in the sand. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). What if we made that our motto, our lapel pin and bumper sticker, for our next large church gathering?

Conclusion

The way of life of those who live in the new creation is rooted and grounded in the love that Christ displayed in going to the cross for all. Whether it is accepting differing roles, and even differing beliefs within the church, responding with love to harsh treatment from *this world* and its authorities, or simply doing acts of hospitality and compassion, the example of the crucified and risen Messiah stands behind all that Paul sees as the renewing of the mind inspired by God's Spirit.

As we contemplate Christ's death and celebrate his resurrection, we also are confronted by the opportunity to open ourselves to this transforming power. It is an opportunity that comes with risks and even dangers. When we seriously consider the possibility of transformation, it is not hard to see crucifixion in it. Changes in how we look at the world, what we value, and how we live always involve the death of some part of our identity and our desires. Truly opening ourselves to God's transforming Spirit and to the cross of Christ will mean leaving behind not only obvious bad habits but also ways of living that have become familiar and manageable, even though we know that we could do better without them. More than that, truly having in us the same mind that was in Christ Jesus (Phil. 2:5) may put us at odds with people and institutions that we have admired and loved. Like Paul, we may find that being crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:19) will lead us to question the unquestionable and think the unthinkable.

If transformation can look like crucifixion, we have seen in these six weeks that when Paul looked at the crucifixion he saw in it God's offer of transformation. For Paul, the Messiah's crucifixion and resurrection changed everything, made everything new—a "new creation" (2 Cor. 5:14–17; Gal. 6:14–15). Wisdom and foolishness, power and weakness, God's teaching and law, indeed, the very nature of God, all took on new and unexpected features following these events. Like many Jews of his day, Paul had been looking forward to a day when God would intervene and set things right. No one expected this intervention to come about through a cross. Once Paul accepted that it had, everything was transformed and turned upside down for him. Again and again, he urges his readers—who now include us—to let ourselves be turned upside down too.

To be fools and nothings, to pattern ourselves after One who gave up divine honor for a shameful death, to be nonconformed to the present age, to be crucified to the world:

this was what Paul proposed for those who believed his gospel message. This gospel was good news in the same way that Good Friday is good. It is the means by which God's good creation (or its human component, at any rate) becomes good again, reaches the goodness that God designed. Yet it challenges those who believe it to accept the bitterness of the cross before the joy of the resurrection. Such a message ran against the grain of ancient culture, and it runs against the grain of our culture. If we take up this challenge, however, we may hope to find in it, as Paul did, "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:24), "a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Women and slaves were not citizens. Epaenetus, Andronicus, and Junia (Rom. 16:5, 7) were not Romans; Prisca and Aquila (16:3–4) were from Asia Minor (Acts 18:2).

2. There are serious doubts about whether Paul actually wrote Ephesians, but Eph. 4:11 shows the same general understanding.