

TUTORIAL
3.15

Righteousness Practiced

Bible presenter Scot Keen describes a transformed life in this tutorial. He shows how the first eleven chapters of theology in Romans helps prepare believers for the application discussed here in chapter twelve.

Introduction

In this tutorial, we will delve into the final section of Romans which is deals with application. So far we've looked at Paul's introduction and his thesis statement: he is not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ because it is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile. Then we discussed condemnation and Paul unified his audience by showing that both Jews and Gentile are under God's wrath, that there is no distinction. He then gave us an answer to our condemnation problem: righteousness is provided through justification. Just as both Jews and Gentiles were united in their condemnation under God, both can be justified by faith through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul then explored sanctification and he dealt with Christian life principles such as being dead to sin and being alive to God. He concluded that we died to the Law and that the Spirit of God indwells believers. Lastly we tackled God's vindication. We analysed God's promises to Israel and discovered that they have not failed. Israel has simply been temporarily set aside in God's program. God used Israel's rejection of the Gospel as an occasion to turn to the Gentiles and reach out to them.

Application

And so we will now look at application, how righteousness is practiced. As we move into chapter twelve, note that the basis for all application is found in Romans 12:1-2, and so I like to call these verses *hinge verses*. They appeal to the previous content in Romans one through eleven and they lay the foundation for the application in the rest of the book.

Walking in love

Let's look at the text. Romans 12:1-2, "Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable

to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” Notice that Paul has written eleven chapters without giving us anything to do. It is only now that we arrive at the application section. I like to contrast this with a lot of discipleship models that we see.

Sometimes it appears that the believer, a new believer, is instantly given a list of things to do and not to do. And what I love about Romans is that before Paul tells us what to do, he gives us the theological basis for it. He does not tell us what to do until he tells us first why and how and I think that is extremely significant. The why behind this is not to gain or maintain a standing with God. In fact, the why is a response of worship to God because of His mercy that shown.

Let's look at this again. He says, “I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God.” Some translations say, “I beseech you brothers by the mercies of God.” Doug Mo and his commentary on Romans calls this an exhortation of grace. It is stronger than a suggestion but it is weaker than a command, and that is because Paul wants our response to be that of genuine worship, not something that is an obligation so much as it is a response to the mercy shown.

Paul's appeal based on the mercies of God has in view all the mercies of God seen in the book of Romans up to this point. This would include God in His grace providing redemption when we were all guilty before God. There are none righteous, not even one, none that does good, none that seeks after God, but now we find that “Apart from the law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ” (Romans 3:21-22).

And so when Paul speaks of the mercies of God, we have in view redemption through Christ. We have propitiation (satisfaction with the payment for our sins) and not only that, but we also have reconciliation (mentioned in chapter five). In chapter four, we found that our sins are not counted against us and instead we have been credited with righteousness. We enjoy reigning in righteousness and grace through Jesus Christ (chapter five). We are dead to sin and alive to God, dead to the law, joined to another, indwelt by the Spirit of God. There is no condemnation, no separation and God is working all things together for good.

We anticipate future glory...we could go on and on and on, but I think it is very important that we meditate on the mercy shown to us and use it as a foundation and basis for our endeavour to live a godly life. Listen to this quote by William R. Newell. He says, “We may venture to say that it's only those who learn to regard themselves as the object of divine mercy, that the deepest

foundations for godliness of life will be or can be laid.” And what Newell is saying is that the better we understand the mercy shown us, the greater the foundation and appeal to live a godly life.

Think about the woman in Luke chapter seven who poured perfume on the Jesus’ feet and wiped his feet with her hair. Jesus said that she loved much because she was forgiven much. In reality, it took the same sacrifice of Christ for all of us to be saved, and as we meditate on how much we have been forgiven it moves us to worship. And so that is what you see in Romans chapter twelve: this urge, this appeal, this exhortation based upon the mercies of God to present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

The imagery Paul uses here comes from the Old Testament sacrificial system, but in Paul's analogy it is not an animal sacrifice but a human one, bringing ourselves before the Lord. It is a beautiful picture. Now if you look at the book of Exodus (and also Leviticus and Numbers) you will find that some sacrifices were mandatory and others were termed freewill offering. The latter were not obligatory, the worshipper was not required to bring them, but here's the catch. If they choose to bring a freewill offering, then it belonged to the Lord the moment it was presented to Him.

Exodus chapter twenty-nine puts it like this, “Whatever touches the altar is holy to the Lord.” It was a freewill offering but, once given, was completely dedicated to God. And that is the imagery that Paul uses here. He is urging us to present our bodies, our entire selves, completely over to God, to remember that we no longer belong to ourselves but to Him instead. And so I want to challenge us. If this is what Paul says we should do, why is it that we are so afraid to do it? Do we not trust God character? He has already shown His character and His attitude towards us in this book of Romans.

I think we are often scared because we know what it might cost us and yet, in reality, this is the greatest thing that a believer can do, our highest worship. Notice that Paul calls this a living sacrifice. In the Old Testament of course we picture a slain sacrifice given to a priest, and by virtue of that, given to God. Paul says *present your bodies as a living sacrifice* and the idea is that we are to go on living as if we have died. We go on living as if we have been slain. It is all about Him and not about us at all. A complete and utter sacrifice to Him is our spiritual service of worship. And the beautiful thing about our submission and surrender is that it is actually an act of worship.

Now God could tell us to do this completely apart from a context of worship. Think of it this way, we belong to Him by virtue of creation. He made us and so He can tell us what to do. We are His by virtue of creation and by virtue of redemption. First Corinthians says, “You were bought with a price. Therefore, glorify God with your bodies.” Paul could make this argument based on creation, or even based on redemption, but he makes his appeal that we

would do this not because we have to, but as an act of worship in response to the mercies of God.

And I challenge you to come to grips with this. Paul says *I beseech you brothers*. So he is speaking to believers and not assuming that they have already come to the point of complete surrender to God. Of course you would know, if you've ever surrendered to God in this manner, you have to surrender again and again because we easily drift away from this frame of mind. As one person has said, the problem with living sacrifices is that they keep removing themselves from the altar. God wants us to be completely given over to Him as our spiritual service of worship.

Be transformed

Note verse two. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." And when Paul speaks about conformity and transformation, we need to understand what he is touching on here. He says *don't be conformed to this world* and the tense of the verb is passive, literally meaning stop allowing the world to conform you. It is something that passively happens as we interact with the cultures around us. We begin to accept the worldview and values and norms of those around us. And Paul says stop. Stop being conformed to this world but instead be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

When Paul speaks about the world he is talking about this world system, this present evil age, as he puts it in Galatians chapter one. Again we are talking about the world's systems and values which are under the dominion of Satan the god of this world. And so Paul is challenging us as believers to learn to recognise and reject the thinking of this world. It's worldview transformation: we learn to evaluate our thoughts based on God's Word. Again he says, don't be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Think about these examples from Scripture. Remember when the disciples came to Jesus and said, "Should we forgive seven times?" The world would say that someone who is truly forgiving would forgive seven times. But Jesus said, "I say not seven times but seventy times seven." And so Jesus contrasted what the world would say with His thoughts. Here is another example. The disciples were discussing the issue of greatness and Jesus said, "Those who are great in the world system have authority over those who are under them." Jesus turned that upside down when he added, "The one who's greatest among you will be servant of all."

One more example of a life transformed is in Matthew chapter sixteen. Jesus talked about life saying, "The one who seeks to save his life will lose it but the one who loses his life for my sake, that person will find it." As usual, Jesus found the worldview that was present and challenged them with His Word.

That is exactly what Paul is pointing out here. We learn to reject the thinking of this world and to embrace what God's Word says about certain things.

Now, I have some examples that I will share very quickly and then move on. Think about ethics. The world speaks frequently about moral relativism; that all truth is relative and that what is true or good for you may not be true or good for me. But God's Word gives moral absolutes.

The world declares that the purpose and meaning of life is to have fun, enjoy yourself and have other people like you. God says that the purpose of life is comes from being made in His image and likeness and therefore we should live in fellowship with Him and honor Him with our lives. And so I want to encourage you to learn to evaluate the belief systems you come across, especially your own, and let them be challenged by the God's Word. That is the worldview transformation and growth that God wants to bring about in our lives.

And so Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed." This too is passive. He says, "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind." The beautiful thing about this is that it is an imperative or a command. Paul is commanding us to be transformed and yet using passive tense. We cannot transform ourselves but are supposed to expose ourselves to that which does transform us, being transformed by the renewing of our minds. The idea is that as we expose ourselves to the Truth of God's Word, His Word renews our mind and changes our thinking, our values and our worldview so that we are thinking God's thoughts after Him. We learn to believe what God says instead of what the world says.

This is phenomenal. When you minister to others, remember that the way God wants to bring about change in lives is not on the outside but the inside; transformation starts on the inside, by the renewing of our minds. Worldliness is not about externals, it is the way we think, and we change that by changing what we think. Christian growth and maturity starts with the renewing of our minds. It is God's Word that changes the way we think. God's methodology for change is from the inside out. You may have noticed that we have only just arrived at the application section of Romans. The first thing God says about it is to be separate from the world for the purpose of being separated for Him. This will be crucial as we move into the rest of the application section.

Finding God's will

Paul says that as our minds are renewed we can know the will of God. Often when we think about the will of God, we think about where we should live, where we should serve, whom we should marry, where we should go to college or what kind of career we should have. Those are some decisions people typically think of when they consider the will of God. I want you to understand that when Paul speaks about God's will in this context, he is talking

about a correlation between knowing the Word of God and knowing the will of God. Knowing the Word of God directly impacts our knowledge of the will of God. We know what God wants us to do when we understand His Word.

Here's a quote from D.A. Carson in his book on prayer *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*. His comments are in reference to Colossians chapter one on the topic of the will of God, but the same principle applies. He says, "We must think through what Paul means by the knowledge of God's will, with which he wants believers to be filled. Very frequently, we're inclined to use the expression, the will of God, to refer to God's will for my vocation or some aspect of my future that is determined by choice." He says that we seek the Lord's will about whom we should marry, major purchases, what church to attend and when we want to move to a new city.

None of this is intrinsically bad as there are many ways in which the Lord does lead us and we should not despise them. Nevertheless, this focus is often quite misleading, perhaps even dangerous, because it encourages us to think about the Lord's will primarily in terms of *my future*, *my vocation* and *my needs* and can become a form of self-centeredness. Instead of thinking about what God means by His will, we approach this in a self-centered way.

Foundation for application

We need to let God's Word show us what His will is. The foundation for application then is Romans 12:1-2, that we would yield ourselves to God as a living sacrifice as an act of worship. Here is what is awesome about this concept. Whatever we do after surrendering ourselves to God is an act of worship, because it begins with giving ourselves completely to God. Therefore when we are serving the body (mentioned in verses three to eight) and interacting with other people (verses fourteen to twenty-one), whatever we are doing can automatically become an act of worship to God because we are doing it as a living sacrifice.

Serving the body

When Paul gets into specifics, the first thing he mentions is serving the body through our spiritual gifts. I love the picture of Jesus washing the feet of the disciples. That is what we do as we serve the body of Christ, we meet the needs of others and reach out to them in compassion. Before we get into the specifics of serving the body and the other details of application, I want you to see that the basis for this, the theological foundation, is a living sacrifice. When Paul moves into application, people frequently end their study of Romans at this point. They conclude that they have got the theology and that is all that they need. But understand that the theology came for the very purpose of having healthy application, and so there is a practical purpose for doctrine. It is intended to lead us to a place of worshipping God with our lives and serving the saints, meeting the needs of others.

And so, let's talk about this in verses three and following. We serve the body through our spiritual gifts, first of all in humility. Paul says, "Through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith" (Romans 12:3). Now it is interesting what Paul says here. He says that God has given to each a measure of faith, but then as we move through the text, he will also talk about the grace and the gifts that are given to us. He uses faith and grace and gifts interchangeably here in Romans chapter twelve to talk about the gifts that God has given to the body and the capacity to use those gifts in serving one another.

When Paul wrote Romans, he was in Corinth, and the believers there had a lot of pride in their gifts. Knowing this, Paul gives a caution here. He says not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, but to have sound judgement. And the concept is that God has given gifts to every believer and so we should not become proud of them, but realise that they are gifts given not for our sake, but for the sake of the body.

And so Paul says in verse four, "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, each of us is to exercise them accordingly." In other words, Paul is saying, "Whatever your gift is, it's not for your sake, it's for the sake of the body." He is reminding us that we are servants of one another, and we should serve first of all in humility, recognising that God is the giver of the gift and that He gave it for the sake of others.

Paul says in verse six, "If prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; or he who exhorts, in his exhortation." In other words, whatever your gift is, then serve in that capacity and be faithful in it because that is how you contribute to the overall growth and function of the body.

Love in action

Paul goes on to speak about love and action. We are moving through this section fairly quickly. This section of Romans is unique because Paul gives short exhortations without much explanation or background, and yet the overarching theme here is love in action.

First of all love as it relates to righteousness. In verse nine Paul says, "Let love be without hypocrisy." And so Paul is making an appeal for a genuine love that would abhor or hate what is evil and cling to what is good. That is what genuine love looks like. Also he says, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love, give preference to one another in honor." And so Paul says we should

put other believers before ourselves. That runs completely in confrontation with our flesh. The way our flesh works is we want everything to be about us, but that should not be a problem remember, because we are supposed to be living sacrifices, and a living sacrifice has already died to itself.

So Paul says, “Be devoted to one another... give preference to one another.” How does love relate to laziness? Paul says, “Not lagging behind in diligence, but fervent in spirit serving the Lord.” Part of our service to Christ and to others is to choosing not to be lazy, but to be fervent and to serve the Lord in that way. Look at verse twelve, “Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer.” I’ll briefly comment on the latter.

Often when people pray, they fall into one extreme or another. Some fall into the ditch of legalism and they feel extreme guilt if they do not pray for an excessive amount of time every day. Others fall into the opposite ditch. They conclude that if they are devoted to anything, then maybe it becomes a form of legalism. Well, Paul strikes a perfect balance and says, “We should be devoted to prayer.” He is saying prayer is something to which we need to commit and prioritise. Paul goes on to admonish the believers to also contribute to the needs of the saints and practise hospitality. In the first century world, there were many opportunities to reach out to saints, to other believers who were in need. God would challenge us to do the same thing even in our day and time.

Overcoming evil with good

Let’s look now at overcoming evil with good, the final section of Romans chapter twelve. We firstly see love pushed to the limits. Look at verse fourteen. Paul says, “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse”. When we are persecuted, our tendency is to desire for the person who is persecuting us to face God’s judgement. Paul says, “Don’t desire their condemnation, but instead, desire their spiritual well-being. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.”

Remember in the Book of Acts, when Saul of Tarsus was watching Stephen being martyred? Saul was guarding the coats of those who were executing Stephen. And when Stephen was being executed, do you remember what he said? He said, “Lord Jesus, do not lay this sin to their charge.” Stephen was blessing those who persecuted him. He desired their salvation instead of their condemnation. When Paul says, “Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse,” I have to believe that he remembers watching that scene and sees Stephen’s desire for their salvation instead of their condemnation. No doubt that marked Paul forever.

Well Paul says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.” This involves entering into the joys and sorrows of others. He then talks about humility and persecution. He says, “Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.” And then

finally, he discusses how we should respond to those who inflict harm on us. Verse seventeen, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.” The tendency is to pay back bad for bad. Paul says, “Do not do that, it's not our right to revenge ourselves. It's not our place.”

When I consider this, I think of David being chased by King Saul. David had opportunities to over and over again to take King Saul's life, but over and over again he would not touch the Lord's anointed. In essence, David was leaving room for God's wrath. He was not paying back evil for evil, he was trusting God with the difficulties that he faced. And so Paul says in verse eighteen, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.” Paul adds a helpful disclaimer because he recognises that sometimes it is not possible, as sometimes the other person does not want to be at peace. And so Paul simply says, “As far as it depends on you.”

“Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God.” If we take our own revenge, we are not leaving room for the wrath of God. So Paul says, “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord”. Now, I don't think that God intends us to find comfort in the fact that He is going to punish the wicked. We see throughout the Psalms that God will ultimately bring judgement on the wicked. And we don't find pleasure in it, as we seek their blessing not their condemnation. Nevertheless, we do know that we do not have to take justice into our hands, because the God of Justice will one day right all the wrongs.

Our posture should be what Paul says in verse twenty, “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Now, sometimes people take the phrase *heaping burning coals on his head* to mean that if we are kind to other people, it will bring greater judgement upon them later on. I don't think that is what Paul has in mind here. I think he is saying that when you feed your enemy, you are going well beyond what would be expected of you. You are showing God's kindness and grace.

I'll give you some background to the phrase *heaping burning coals*. In the first century world, people heated their homes with fires, they cooked with a fires and so they was an essential part of their daily lives. But they didn't have matches or a lighter to start their fire, so they would use existing coals to start a new fire. And from what I understand, it was a cultural expectation that if someone came to you to borrow fire, you were obligated to at least give them a burning coal. But it would be going above and beyond what was expected culturally if you gave them burning coals in the heaps.

What Paul says is that when we feed our enemy, it is as if we are going above and beyond what would be expected. We are heaping burning coals upon

their head, we are being extremely generous, and in that way, we win. And here is what I mean by winning, Paul says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). When we pay back bad for bad, evil for evil, we are losing. We are being overcome by evil. When we show grace and kindness even to those who are evil to us, we are overcoming evil with good. And in that way, we are showing the grace of God to those who are undeserving, just like you and I are undeserving of God's grace as well.



DISCUSSION POINTS

Righteousness Practiced

1. What's the significance of the fact that Paul beseeched the Romans on the basis of God's mercies?
2. What does it mean to present your bodies as a living sacrifice to God?
3. Not all Christians have presented themselves to God as living sacrifices. What are some possible reasons for their failure to do so?
4. What is indicated by the imperative mood of 12:2 “be transformed”?
5. What is indicated by the passive voice (be transformed) of 12:2?
6. How does Biblical transformation take place?
7. Now that we have arrived at the application section of the book, what does God say to us?
8. Are you allowing this reality to effect the way you view yourself and the way you live?
9. Have you presented yourself to God as a living sacrifice? If not, on a separate sheet of paper, write down the reasons for not doing so, and think about the validity of your reasoning.
10. In what ways have you been conformed to the world?