

True Christians

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 17th of February 2002.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled True Christians and is based on Romans chapter 12 verses 9 to 21.

And you may like to have open the passage from Romans chapter 12 on page 9 to 3 in the black Bibles that are in the pews in front of you.

Romans 12 verse 9 onwards. And let us pray. Oh God our Father these words challenge us to our heart.

We pray that you may give us hearts to receive them and minds that are transformed by your gospel so that we may do them. And we pray this for Jesus' sake.

[1 : 10] Amen. It was Orthodox Christmas in 1994. That's celebrated in the first week of January. And I happened to be in Bethlehem on that day.

In the very church that marks the place of Jesus' birth, there were of course great celebrations for his birth on this Orthodox Christmas day.

The different Orthodox churches in turn at set times would have their processions in and around the church. And each procession was led by a Muslim. A man wearing a fez hat.

Why? Why? In a Christian church, marking one of the most significant events in world history, the birth of Jesus, why should a Christian procession be led by a Muslim?

And the answer is because through the ages, the Christian denominations who own or have parts of that church building are in constant bickering and fighting.

[2 : 13] Indeed, a fight between Christian denominations in that church building in the 19th century was one of the triggers for the Crimean War. In the same year it happened that I was in Jerusalem for Orthodox Easter in 1994.

And there in the church that marks the death and the resurrection of Jesus, there were of course thousands and thousands of pilgrims and tourists. And different church denominations had their processions at set times in and around the church building.

And they also were led by a Muslim. Because again, the Christian denominations fight and bicker with each other there on the place that marks Jesus' death and resurrection.

Indeed, one of the side chapels in this large, fairly ugly church of the Holy Sepulchre marking the death and resurrection of Jesus is a Syrian Orthodox chapel.

It remains still fire-scarred and charred from a fire some decades ago. But the fighting and squabbling between the Christian denominations has meant that nobody's ever taken responsibility to fix and repair the work that was damaged then.

[3 : 25] Now it may not be quite as bad here as in the Middle East. But you drive around Doncaster and you can find Anglican and Uniting and Roman Catholic churches fairly clearly and prominently.

If you look hard enough you'll find a Salvation Army church hidden away. A Brethren Chapel. If you go far enough down Doncaster Road, a Baptist church and so on. Why so many types of church, people ask?

Why so many different denominations? Why such disunity in the body of Christ? But even between, not only between denominations, but within denominations, there is often disunity and fighting, malice and strife.

Not only within denominations, within congregations as well. So many times I hear of Christian churches, parishes, denominations where there is serious division and dispute over different issues or between ages or whatever the issue is.

Since it began 2,000 years ago, the Christian church has been marked by disunity and division. It's not new in our age, let me say.

[4 : 40] The reason why St. Paul and others wrote so many letters in the New Testament is often to deal with the issue of disunity and division. And the letter to the Romans is no exception.

Here was a church in Rome, the centre of the empire. Paul had yet to visit it. And he wrote perhaps his greatest letter to it. Often people think the letter to the Romans is really just Paul trying to give a mature reflection on what the gospel is.

To some extent there's truth in that. But what seems to have provoked him to write such a lengthy and thought out letter is because the Christian church in Rome was suffering the stress fractures that were threatening division.

It was a church struggling to maintain unity. Not least, unity between Jew and Gentile. That's why Paul wrote Romans.

And he's trying to encourage the church in Rome to be unified, to live in harmony, to express love between its members. But what we also see in Romans, before we get on to these verses today, is that it is not unity at any price.

[5 : 48] Paul's not saying, look, put aside all your differences and just get together and be one big happy family. It doesn't really matter what lies at the core. The reason why he spends 11 chapters expounding the gospel of God concerning his son Jesus Christ is to show that there is a unity amongst Christians, but it's a unity in the gospel.

For 11 chapters, Paul has expounded that gospel of God about Jesus Christ. And throughout his exposition of the gospel has shown that he's dealing with the issues of division, not least between Jew and Gentile.

So he stresses that all people, Jew and Gentile included, stand before the throne of God condemned because of their sin, all without distinction, fall short of the glory of God.

But likewise, the gospel is the good news that all Jew and Gentile, that is non-Jew, without exception, can benefit from the grace that is offered through the death of Jesus for forgiveness of sins.

There is no separate or fast track for some Christians or people over and against others. Whilst all may be equally sinners and under condemnation, condemnation, all equally can be beneficiaries of the grace of forgiveness in the cross of Christ.

[7 : 08] In the end, for the purposes of salvation, there is no distinction Jew and Gentile. And therefore the gospel brings unity because we are saved on an equal basis and an equal footing.

We are equally undeserving but can equally be the beneficiaries of Jesus' death for us. But the gospel is not just about becoming saved, not just about what we believe in.

The purpose of the gospel, we saw in the very first sermon on this series, which was in June last year, is for the obedience of faith. That is, the gospel is to bring about change in our lives so that we may live lives that are full of obedient faith.

Not just a faith that is head knowledge, but a faith that is necessarily accompanied by changed lives of obedience to God. If you remember back to December when we saw the first half of this chapter, in light of the gospel, or as Paul says in chapter 12, verse 1, by the mercies of God, he urges Christians to present their bodies to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him, which is your spiritual worship.

And he goes on then to say in verse 2, do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. Christian unity derives from the gospel of God concerning his son, Jesus Christ.

[8 : 42] There's no unity with other gospels. There's no unity when there are different gospels being espoused. It is only the true gospel of God concerning his son, Jesus, that brings unity.

And for those who've responded to that gospel with faith, unity is a must to practice. Now, you don't need me to say that this world does not really know much about unity and harmony and mutual love.

Our world is characterized in every age and in every continent by wars, by broken relationships, by disunity, by hatred, by distrust, by broken relationships nationally, internationally, as well as broken human relationships within families and friends.

But the church is to be different. Christians are not to be conformed to that standard of the world, but to be, because of the gospel, transformed by the renewing of minds.

Non-conformity to the world, transformation of our minds, that is the basis of what we're reading in these commands in these verses. It's a series of short, sharp commands throughout verses 9 to 21.

[10:01] But if anything, the common theme is that Christians are to live lives of unity, love and harmony, unlike the world.

Let love be genuine, Paul begins in verse 9. That is, a love that is without pretense, without hypocrisy, a love that is not just a put-on, a charade, an acting venture, but rather love that is committed, that is real, that is enduring.

A love that reflects God's love, which is greater than human love. If you remember back to chapter 5, Paul's argument there about God's love is that it is greater than human love, hence we can rely upon it and hope in it.

Human love fails to give itself in the end. Only rarely will it do that. But God's love is proven in that Jesus died for us. Even while we were sinners.

That is the sort of love that is genuine love. A selfless, sacrificial, enduring, committed love for the benefit of other people. That is the genuine love that does not disappoint.

[11:12] The world's love is skin deep. In fact, it's just infatuated by skin. It is disappointing love because it so rarely endures.

Our love is to be genuine love, like God's. And such love is not a weak or soppy sentimentality. It is robust love.

It is a love that hates evil, Paul goes on to say in verse 9, and a love that holds fast to what is good. Our world tolerates evil, often turns a blind eye to it, and often secretly indulges and rejoices in it. But rather, we are to be abhorred by it, to be repulsed by it. And we are to hold fast to what is good. Not like the world to be indifferent to what is good.

Not to pick and choose between good and evil as it brings pleasure. We are to hold fast with a tenacious grip to what is good. like a dog that has got a bone or a tree stick or a ball in its mouth that refuses to let it go.

[12:19] That is to be our tenacious grip or hold on what is good. Whatever the cost to us, we are to hold fast cleave to what is good. Paul goes on in verse 10, we are to love one another with mutual affection.

The word suggests a family or filial affection for brothers and sisters and family members. And of course, the reason why he uses that expression here is because Christians, whatever our background, socioeconomically or racially, Jew or Gentile, we now belong together in a family. Paul has explained all that in chapter 8. That God's grace means we are adopted into his family because we have God's Holy Spirit within us. We can call God our Father, Abba Father.

We are in a family relationship not only with God but necessarily with each other. One of the great disappointments, I think, of the Victorian era for Christian faith is that it began to regard religion as a private affair.

And so Christians might come along to church and sit there and never get to know any other Christians, scurry out after the service and so on. I remember that there were people who were horrified when we introduced things like greetings of peace 20 or 30 years ago into Anglican services.

[13:34] And I've heard of a woman at the church I was at in England before coming here to Doncaster who said, I've sat next to this lady for 28 years and I'm not going to speak to her now. That is not Christian faith.

Christian faith necessarily means that we have responsibility with each other. It's not about our private communion with God. It is about our belonging together in a spiritual family.

We are brothers and sisters together. Therefore, we are to love one another with mutual affection. Then Paul says at the end of verse 10 we're to outdo each other in showing honour.

And again, that's different from the world. For our world is trying to outdo each other in sucking up the honour, claiming the honour for itself. So we have endless parades of people who are honourable in sports and acting ventures, all sorts of awards that keep on being bestowed on people who get paid huge amounts of money for enjoying themselves.

We have endless Australia Day awards and all sorts of ways in which the world is trying to suck up and honour itself. Paul says we're to outdo another in showing honour.

[14:48] That is, showing honour to other people, honouring them, esteeming them, praising them, encouraging them, putting them first and lifting them up. Not by some showy, flashy award around a neck or cup or trophy to hold, but in honouring people as people under God.

We're to outdo each other almost in competition by putting ourselves down and other people up. Now Paul has just been saying before this paragraph that within the Christian fellowship there are all sorts of different gifts that Christians can exercise.

God gives the gifts for the building up of the body of Christ. The danger with any gifts that God gives, and it seemed to be a danger here in Romans 12 as it was in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, is that the gifts might become ways of claiming honour, putting ourselves up, puffing ourselves up with pride.

Paul says none of that is to be the Christian feature or mark, but rather we're to outdo each other in showing honour for others, not for ourselves. Then he goes on to say, and these words seem to fit together, do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Verse 11. And again that's different from the world. You see, especially in religious matters, our world doesn't like fanatics. It doesn't like zealous people, enthusiasts.

[16:09] In the 18th century when the influence of John Wesley was at its peak and the Methodist church began, it was regarded rather derogatively as those enthusiasts, those people who are so zealous, they've overdone it a bit.

I remember when I was living at university interstate and getting very involved in Christian things and then working full time on campus, family members in letters to me saying, look, tone it down a bit.

Be moderate in your religion. Don't become such a fanatic like the Billy Grahams of this world.

That's the world's view about religion. It's trying to say all things in moderation and especially after September 11th.

It's a world that does not want to see religious fanaticism and zeal and ardour. But Paul says that's not to be the case for Christians. We're not to lag in zeal, we're to be zealous, ardent.

Ardent in spirit is actually as though your spirit is on fire or aglow is literally the connotation of the word. As though God's spirit has somehow set our hearts on fire for God.

[17:22] That we're not just sort of treating God with a bit of moderation when we feel like it. But we're enthusiastic and zealous for the things of God and the honour and glory of him. But often, enthusiasm can be misdirected.

Passion can be misplaced as though passion in itself is the goal. But no, Paul says, our passion, enthusiasm, zeal and ardour and fervency are to be directed rightly to serving the Lord.

That's where all that energy is to be channelled, into serving the Lord wholeheartedly. Indeed, the word serve, of course, has a connotation of slavery. Then in verse 12, he says, rejoice in hope.

Be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Rejoice in hope because hope does not disappoint, he said in chapter 5. Now, patient in suffering because we know, as he said in chapter 8, all things work together for good for those who love God.

Persevere in prayer because God's Holy Spirit has been given to us to enable us to pray and pray to our God as our Father, he said in chapter 8. And again, this is so different from the world.

[18:35] The world does not rejoice in hope, it has a cautious hope, if not an outright pessimism about the future. The world doesn't treat suffering with patience, the world tries to avoid suffering.

So it promotes euthanasia and pill-popping to avoid any suffering at all. And the world may pray rarely, such as September the 12th and the Sunday the 16th after it, but it's not characterized by perseverance in prayer.

The churches that were full on September the 16th are probably not today. Paul continues on, contribute to the needs of the saints, extend hospitality to strangers, verse 13.

And again, because Christians belong together as a family, we have a responsibility to contribute to the needs of our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. And the sense of contribute has got a sense of generosity about it as well.

Extend hospitality, he says, not just when somebody lands on your doorstep, but actually the word is a proactive word. It means pursue hospitality. That is, look out for people who are in need.

[19:47] How wonderful it is when on those very rare occasions somebody might, as a new person, come to church and be invited back to a meal and some of the needs, some of the generous hospitality can be offered.

That is, hospitality to strangers here. Not to our friends because we know they're going to return a very nice meal one day for us, but extend or pursue hospitality to others, even strangers, whether even Christian or not.

That's not our world. Our world's not very generous at contributing to the needs of saints, let alone others. And our world's not all that hospitable at times.

Australia's treatment of refugees probably puts that into a sharp focus. all of this so far is non-conformity to the world.

That becomes even clearer in the next verse, verse 14. Paul says there, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them.

[20 : 48] Echoing the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount amongst other places, but not only Jesus' words of course, his practice as well. This is revolutionary stuff.

The world doesn't want to bless a persecutor, it wants to get back and kill them. This is non-conformity at its extreme. And Paul has in mind here, as the Bible in so many places does, is that when we live true Christian lives, we will be non-conformists in our world and that will provoke and arouse opposition and persecution.

Oh, we live so comfortably in Australia, it's very hard for us to understand really the threats of persecution that so many Christians in our world face. Christians in the Sudan whose lives are constantly under threat.

In Nigeria, in Indonesia, in Saudi Arabia, in China, in other places of the world where death or jail is what awaits so often Christians facing persecution.

Bless, not curse, Paul says, your persecutors. And then he moves on. A bit of a rush, racing through all these commands as a sort of checklist of Christian life.

[22 : 07] Another expression of genuine love in verse 15. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. You see, love is not aloof. Love is not a spectator sport.

But love gets involved. Love rejoices when somebody rejoices. Love weeps when somebody weeps. And again, that's not what the world does very often.

So often, you see, we're in competition with people in our world. And so somebody else's joy is my misfortune. If somebody else wins or inherits a fortune, I haven't.

And I might covet or resent it. If somebody else wins the trophy, it's because I or somebody I love may not have. And so my joy is muted with some sullen resentment or disappointment.

But real love neither watches from the stadium nor is shallow enough to cover up bitter disappointment. Real love really rejoices with those who rejoice and really weeps with those who weep.

[23 : 16] And so Paul moves on, maybe even in a sense summarising what he's said so far. Live in harmony with one another.

That's why Paul wrote this letter to a church that was suffering with stress fractures of disunity. Live in harmony with one another. In Paul's mind, probably the key division was a Jew-Gentile one.

In our churches, there will probably be different distinctions. Often the cause of disharmony is pride, putting ourselves up and above other people, a snobby, snuttish sort of Christianity that looks down the nose at others who perhaps don't quite know their way around the building or the prayer book or don't quite know the customs of what happens.

None of that is to be practised in a Christian church, Paul says. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, proud or snobbish, he says, but associate with the lowly.

Don't just mix with your sort of upper middle class, socio-economic, intelligent, informed group, but put aside your pride.

[24 : 31] Live in harmony by associating with the lowly, the meek, the poor. Because throughout this letter, Paul has made it very clear that there is no basis for human pride in the gospel.

It may be full of abundant good news of God's grace, but that's because it first pulls the carpet from under our feet, bringing us to our knees in humility before God because we're spiritually bankrupt before Him without Christ.

There's no place for pride with God and therefore nor is there in our Christian relationships either. live in harmony with one another.

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly, Paul says. And picking up the same theme at the end of verse 16, do not claim to be wiser than you are.

That sort of world that claims its wisdom as though it knows everything, but without God of course it's really foolish. this letter was probably written about 55 AD, 20 years or so after the resurrection of Jesus.

[25 : 40] Towards the end of Paul's ministry he's writing from Corinth which is right near the end of his missionary journeys. Later on he himself will be taken to Rome and there die as a martyr for the Christian faith.

Probably it's written in the first year of Nero as the emperor of the Roman Empire. He became the emperor in 54 AD. And it may be that Paul even foresaw or heard the early rumbles of persecution that within a few years would give way to the fully fledged Christian persecution in Rome, the feeding of Christians to lions and their execution and so on.

How should Christians react to the threats of persecution? Not as the world reacts, but that's how Paul finishes this chapter in verses 17 to 21 dealing at length with this thing.

You see, the world seeks vengeance, retaliation, revenge, retribution. We see it in road rage. We see it in neighbourly rage.

We see it in international rage as well. Our world is incensed by injustice. It wants to see the bad guys punished. That happened as early on as the time of Cain, when he was full of revenge to kill his brother.

[26 : 58] It's why in the Old Testament laws they set aside cities of refuge, so that if somebody accidentally harmed or killed somebody, they could go to this place to prevent easy revenge being carried out against them.

Of course, there are still modern cities of refuge. Mallorca, for example, so that Christopher Scase can escape there and the whole of Australia is incensed that he can get away with whatever he did or didn't do, and rejoices and rubs its hands with glee when last year he died.

That's the world, wanting to see the bad guys being punished, wanting to retaliate, repay, wanting to see revenge being done. And the world applauds when the bad guys get their just desserts, from kids films, adult films, in real life as well.

So Paul says in verse 17, do not repay anyone evil for evil. But take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. That is, however you are treated, even if with the most vicious and persistent evil, and the evil doer gets away with it, respond with good with what is noble.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. That is, it's not always possible to live at peace. You might have a very belligerent or difficult next door neighbour, I sympathise with you.

[28 : 27] Or you might have neighbours over the roads who have got angry dogs that sort of run around, I can sympathise with you there as well. Insofar as it is possible, live peaceably with all.

Now you might say, well isn't that just weak? Isn't that just giving in to evil and letting evil run its rampage around us and over us? How can Christians sit back and let persecutors get away with it? Isn't God a God of justice? Ought not we to be doing something? The grounds of non-retaliation are the fact that God himself is the final judge.

Vengeance belongs to him, not us. And on the day when he judges the world, justice will finally be done. God is the one who executes vengeance.

And so quoting from the Old Testament from Deuteronomy, Paul says in verse 19, beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God. For it's written, vengeance is mine, I will repay.

[29 : 49] Says the Lord, indeed, for us, we are to do as verse 20 says, if your enemies are hungry, feed them. Good grief, surely not our enemies. Feed them. Yes, Paul says, that's not repaying evil with evil, that's loving your enemies as Jesus both said and did.

If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. And then he says in a fairly enigmatic statement at the end of verse 20, for by doing this you'll heap burning coals on their heads.

Something this is to win them over to Christ, that they may repent. And it's great when that does happen. But the thrust of that statement is that judgment will be heaped up against them if we continue to offer them good and love and serve them rather than repaying their evil with more evil. We're to trust in God's final judgment, where burning coals will be rained down on those who oppose God. These are difficult words.

It is difficult to imagine facing persecution as so many Christians do. But in those countries where Christians are being put to death purely because of their faith, I think foremost in our prayers for our brothers and sisters in such places are praying that they do not repay evil for evil.

[31 : 11] One of the great tragedies of the ongoing flare-ups and strifes and riots in Nigeria in recent last two years has been that too often Christians pick up stones and bricks to retaliate.

Maybe more lives will be lost if there's no retaliation. But God works things for good for those who love him. And our love for him must be expressed by trusting his judgment and not repaying evil for evil.

Paul finishes the chapter by saying in verse 21, do not be overcome by evil. That is by being drawn and seduced into retaliation to violence and to revenge, but rather overcome evil with good.

Feed your enemies, give them something to drink, love them, do what's honourable and loving to them, bless them, and do not curse them. The model, of course, is the cross, the masterpiece of genuine love.

In a sense, in these commands, we've come full circle in this book, oddly enough. In chapter 1, as Paul began his exposition of the gospel, he described people, the world, that refused to know God, the world that did not honour God as God.

[32 : 34] Claiming to be wise, he said they are in fact fools. And here, Paul says to us in verse 16, do not claim to be wiser than you are. In chapter 1, the world is described as being full of strife and malice.

Here, Christians are exhorted to live at peace with all. In chapter 1, the world is described as being arrogant. Paul says, do not be haughty.

In chapter 1, the world invents evil and applauds those who are evildoers. Here, Christians are to abhor evil. In chapter 1, the world is described as God-hating.

Here, we are to serve the Lord with zeal. In chapter 1, the world is described as being heartless.

Here, we are to rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep, show mutual affection, and have genuine love.

This is non-conformity. to this world at every point. This is not how the world behaves in verses 9 to 21. By and large, there are sometimes exceptions.

[33 : 49] The world, because it refuses to honour God as God, is full of strife and disunity.

Christians are not to be conformed to that model, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds in the light of the gospel.

You see, the harmony that Paul is commanding here is the fruit of the gospel he's expounded in 11 chapters. We must never lose sight that the basis of our unity is the gospel of God concerning his son, Jesus Christ.

And our transformation comes through minds that are renewed by that same gospel. people. This lifestyle described here is not natural for us. What is natural is what's described in chapter 1, to be lovers of evil, not haters of it.

Haters of God, not lovers of him. So to practice these things will mean consistently we are counter-cultural, consistently we are non-conformist, and consistently we will provoke opposition.

But also this list is in a sense of checklist for us about our responses to the gospel of obedient faith. Is this a description of you, these verses 9 to 21?

[35 : 04] Is it a description of us at Holy Trinity? For the sake of the gospel of God concerning his son, Jesus, we must strive to live this life.

Amen. pour go to Ephesians 20 to