

# THIS IS HOW WE LOVE

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R O M A N S   1 2 - 1 6

CROSSCULTURE



STUDY GUIDE

# INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD BY SANDY CITRO

Looking at my body shape, I suppose it is not surprising if I tell you that I have been going to the local swimming pool semi-regularly. Recently, however, after my wife mentioned to me about some fitness classes at the gym there, I decided to check out what the gym has to offer and what it means (read: how much it costs) to be a member. The staff took us to the gym floor, showed us the three different rooms for various fitness classes, and explained to us about the benefits of membership.

At the time of writing this, I have not joined the gym yet. I am still praying whether this is God's will for me. Anyway, this is not the point. What I am trying to say is this: As I walk around the gym, I notice a few frames or posters on the walls reminding the patrons about how they should conduct themselves around the gym. For example, one should always carry a towel and wipe the equipment after each use. So, becoming a member necessitates that you agree with their policies or rules. Not only do the rules reflect its values, the fitness centre has also decided that every patron must conduct themselves accordingly so that everyone will reap the benefits of his or her membership and that everyone will be able to accomplish their purposes of becoming a member.

Similarly, almost every, if not all, organisation has a policy about how one can become a member and, subsequently, rules that its members must adhere to, so that everyone can enjoy the benefit of being a member. The policies, regulations or codes of conduct reflect why the organisation exists in the first place and what it represents. By joining an organisation, you, therefore, commit to understand the vision, the mission, and the values of the organisation and agree to conduct yourself accordingly.

Joining the family of God is no different. Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Romans, has laboured in the first 11 chapters to show us what God has done for us through His Son Jesus Christ so that you and I, who don't deserve to be a member of God's family, can become one. Paul also tells us why God did what He did. Furthermore, Paul also explains to us the privileges and the remarkable benefits of being the members of God's family. Paul is so

awestruck by the incredible knowledge of what God has decided to do for us that he ends chapter 11 with this doxology:

*Romans 11:33-36*

<sup>33</sup> *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*

*How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!*

<sup>34</sup> *"For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?"*

<sup>35</sup> *"Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?"*

<sup>36</sup> *For from him and through him and to him are all things.  
To him be glory forever. Amen.*

The remaining chapters of Romans (chapters 12 to 16) tell us how we should then conduct ourselves in relation to God and one another now that we are part of God's family. Apostle Paul affirms from the start of chapter 12 that the basis of everything we do in God's family is the mercies that we have received from God (Romans 12:1). This knowledge should then overflow in the way we serve one another, love one another (including those who have wronged us), relate to the authorities, appreciate those with 'stronger' or 'weaker' faith, and live in community with those from different backgrounds. Essentially, Romans 12 to 16 shows how Christians should live with one another in light of what God has done for us, in us, and through us. Therefore, if the whole law can be fulfilled by the commandment to love (Gal. 5:14; Matt. 22:37-40), in Romans 12-16, Paul is saying to the Christians in Rome, *"This is, therefore, how we love."*

It is our hope and prayer that as we go through Romans 12 to 16 together, we will grow in the way we love one another in a way that reflects what God has done for us in Christ.

# TRUE WORSHIP

ROMANS 12:1-2

## Context

Like most of Paul's epistles, the book of Romans can be divided into two major sections: the theological and the application sections. Of course, it does not mean that the former is not practical or the latter is not theological. However, Paul labours first in explaining the theological foundation of what God has done through His Son Jesus Christ before moving on to applying it to the recipient church.

In Romans, Paul spends the first 11 chapters explaining the human condition and God's redemption plan, before moving to practical applications. He begins Romans 12 by saying, "I appeal to you therefore, brothers..." The word 'therefore' refers to what Paul has discussed in chapters 1 through 11. It is highly advisable that you read through chapters 1 to 11 in your own time.

1. Go through the following verses to get a glimpse of what Paul proclaims in those chapters:

Verse	Paul's Point(s)
Romans 1:16-17	
Romans 1:18	
Romans 3:21-24	
Romans 5:1-2	
Romans 6:1-4	
Romans 8:1-2	
Romans 8:38-39	

In Romans 9 to 11, Paul then talks about how God has rejected some of the Israelites because they have rejected the gospel. At the same time, God has extended His salvation to the Gentiles (including Roman Christians) purely because of His mercy. Therefore, Gentile Christians must realise that they have received God's pure mercy and God has included them in His grand redemption plan. All the above serves as the context for what Paul is saying in Romans 12-16.

## Observations

2. In verse 1, Paul urges us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is our spiritual worship. The word 'spiritual' is the word *logikos* in its original Greek language, which could mean either 'reasonable' or 'rational.'<sup>1</sup>

In light of the context above, if you replace the word 'spiritual' to 'reasonable' or 'rational,' how will it affect the way you understand Paul's exhortation?

## Meaning

3. During Paul's time, many Greek people were brought up on the Platonic thought that regarded the body as 'bad' and the soul or the spirit as 'good.' The human spirit was imprisoned in the body, and the end goal is for the spirit to escape from the body. Interestingly, even Christians today speak a lot more about giving our 'hearts' to God, rather than our 'bodies.'

In light of both the Greek cultural context in Paul's time and our contemporary Christian culture, how does the instruction in Romans 12:1 help you understand the kind of worship that is pleasing to God?

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *The message of Romans: God's good news for the world* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 321.

4. One common question that Christians regularly ask is this: “What is the will of God for me?” or “How do I know what God’s will is for me?”

How should Romans 12:2 inform (or even challenge) your understanding of God’s will for us?

## **Application**

5. Paul suggests that the way for Christians to be set apart for God and not be conformed to the world is by being transformed by the renewal of the mind (see also Titus 3:5; Psalm 51:10; 2 Cor. 4:16-18). How can a Christian do this practically? (See also Psalm 119:9; Rom. 6:11-14; Eph. 4:17-24; Col. 3:1-10)?

6. Discuss one or both of the following case studies:

- a. Jack has just become a Christian after hearing about the gospel. He learned and believed that Jesus Christ died for the forgiveness of his sins and that he does not need to (in fact he can never) obey God’s law perfectly in order to be saved. With this newfound freedom in Christ, Jack naively and excitedly thinks that he does not need to obey God’s commandments anymore since his faith in Christ is what ultimately saves him.

How would you encourage and exhort Jack in a way that is faithful to the message of the gospel?

- b. Peter is not a Christian. The biggest obstacle for him is that being a Christian means he cannot do many things that he can do as a non-Christian. If he becomes a Christian, he has to start doing things that he did not need to do previously.

How would you help encourage Peter in his spiritual journey?

# SERVE ONE ANOTHER

ROMANS 12:3-8

## Context

In the last study, we learned that Romans 12 marks a transition in Paul's letter from the more theological to the more practical applications of his writing. Paul also encourages us to not be conformed to the world, but to be transformed by the renewal of our mind. In this study, Paul starts to elaborate on how we should think about ourselves in relation to other people.

## Observations

Paul makes a very thoughtfully constructed statement in verse 3: "Don't think of yourself more highly *than you ought*". Many people associate arrogance or pride with something negative, and may therefore believe that being as humble as possible is the ideal. But Paul doesn't say this. Rather, he carefully adds in the phrase 'than you ought', as if suggesting that being too humble is not necessarily a good thing either.

1. What are the problems of being too arrogant or prideful? And what are the problems of being too humble?

Paul then mentions how we ought to evaluate ourselves, that it should be done soberly, as well as in accordance with the amount of faith God has given us. The word 'sober' here seems to reiterate the previous point about being realistic and lucid when thinking about ourselves, without inflating or deflating our value.

2. Why should the amount of faith you were given decide how highly you ought to think of yourself?

## **Meaning**

In addition to our measure of faith, Paul also points out that comparing ourselves to others in the church can often be a stumbling block to both us (in how we think of ourselves) and the church. He uses the analogy of the human body and the church (also seen in 1 Cor. 12) to explain that different people have been given different gifts, and all are required (not just tolerated!) for the church to function healthily.

3. What is a spiritual gift? Is it any different from your talents? (See also 1 Cor. 12:1-11)
  
4. Are you inclined to think that some spiritual gifts are more prestigious or useful than others? If so, which and why? If not, why not? (See also 1 Cor. 12:12-26)

We live in a world with a distorted definition of equality. Equality is used as the be-all and end-all basis for demanding change in all aspects of our lives where we feel we do not get what we deserve compared to someone else. For many, the goal is complete identicalness. But with Paul's simple yet profound analogy of us as parts of a whole body, he illustrates a plain truth: though the world seeks equality in function, what we truly desire is equality in value.

And in Christ we can obtain this equality, where all are given their share, and called to exercise their gifts to the best of their ability, all with the assurance that our value as children of Christ is undisputed.

## **Application**

5. Tom is a naturally critical person, and has a tendency to find faults during the running of his weekly church service, though he prefers to think of his comments as 'promoting constructive criticism and helping people grow'. This week, 3 criticisms came to his mind:



- The person in charge of AV on occasion did not swap slides during the worship singing at the appropriate time;
- The person doing the Bible reading was new, and did not read from the correct version of the Bible, making it difficult to follow; and
- The preacher appeared to misinterpret a verse of the Bible and the corresponding portion of the sermon he felt was questionable.

For each of these criticisms, do you think Tom should: (a) voice his concern to one of his friends who is in a leadership position within the church; (b) voice his concern to the person involved; (c) voice his concern to his wife; or, (d) keep it to himself? What are the dangers of each of these courses of action?

6. Paul encourages us in verse 6: "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." He then gives us examples of gifts that God has given to His people in verses 6 to 8. Look at other examples of spiritual gifts mentioned in the NT (e.g., 1 Corinthians 12:8–11, 27–31; 1 Peter 4:10–11; and Ephesians 4:11–12).

Which gifts do you think God has blessed you with? How can you use those gifts to serve one another in your life group and in the church? Take time in your group to encourage and affirm each other's gifts.

# OUTDO ONE ANOTHER IN SHOWING HONOUR

ROMANS 12:9-13

## Context

In the last study we discussed how humility and pride should work in our lives, as well as reminded ourselves that we each have a different role to play in the body of Christ and this should not be used as a reason for conflict.

This week, we continue with Romans 12:9-13, where Paul imparts wisdom on how a Christian should live. The overarching emphasis is to live *with love*. Packed into these few short sentences are a number of distinct ideas that we will explore together.

## Observations and Meaning

1. Paul begins this section with an emphatic imperative: "Let love be genuine" (v. 9a) We are aware that at times our love is not genuine. How can love not be genuine? And what does genuine love look like?
2. Paul then continues his exhortation with another imperative: "Abhor what is evil" (v. 9b). If we abhor what is evil, wouldn't that make us like those 'radical' Christians we hear about that hate everything and everyone? Why is it necessary to abhor what is evil, and how would that look like in a transformed Christian?

In reality, abhorring what is evil is integral to the definition of love, just like judgment and justice are integral parts of God's love for us. This may take a while to digest for some people. We need to be very clear about what is right and wrong, so that we can love what is good. However, the Bible says that this clarity can sit side by side with our love for our fellow sinners (see vv. 10,

14), the same way we may love our spouses or friends despite having differences of opinion.

3. How does 'outdo one another in showing honour' practically look like for you in various contexts of your life (e.g., home, study, workplace, church, etc.)?

In light of verse 11, if we are not intentional about our faith, we can easily slip into a routine over time, and forget why we are doing what we are doing. We may end up ritually praying the same prayer every day without reflecting on what we are saying, or get caught up in the busyness of serving in our ministry that we forget its original goal. Paul's exhortation here reminds us to always be conscious of our faith and put God front and centre in our lives, rather than switch on the autopilot.

In verse 12, Paul encourages us to rejoice in hope. Notice he does not say rejoice when good things happen to you or when God blesses you or when you reach heaven, but to rejoice as long as there is hope.

In a world increasingly denying the existence of God, hope is becoming a scarce commodity. Many people who do not know God also find life meaningless and without hope, just as we once were before coming to Christ (Eph. 2:12). For many struggling with depression or thoughts of suicide, hope is the one thing they long for the most. How fortunate are we then, to have this constant source of hope in our lives! And during times where this hope seems a bit distant or foreign, Paul's word encourages us to pray, be patient, and remain steadfast in the assurance that He loves us and has our best interests in mind.

4. Paul encourages us to be patient in tribulation. Why should we be patient in tribulation rather than fall into despair? And what do these two parts of verse 12 have to do with constant prayer?

5. How does Jesus' life serve as an example for us in light of verses 9 to 12?

In verse 13, Paul makes clear that we are still living in this world although we are not of it, and therefore we should be helping each other in tangible ways in addition to simply engaging in fellowship or prayer together. This was especially important in the early church where believers may have had little in their possession, and to some extent is still relevant today, particularly in certain parts of the world. If the group has time, consider how we can contribute to each other's needs in a practical manner.

## **Application**

6. Marshall and Lily are a married couple having a disagreement. Marshall is thrifty, and believes all material blessings come from God, and therefore we should be good stewards of money, spending it wisely. He is upset by Lily's shopping habits, which he thinks is more than necessary. Lily thinks she deserves to enjoy life once in a while and doesn't see a problem with her shopping, since their financial situation is not declining.

Meanwhile, Lily is upset with Marshall because she thinks he has a video game addiction. She thinks life is precious and he shouldn't be wasting that much time playing video games and would prefer if he were more productive. Marshall thinks he deserves to take a break after a long day of work. They both think they're right, and don't know how to get through to their spouse.

Using Paul's advice in today's study, what are some things they should, and shouldn't, do in order to resolve this conflict?

The questions listed in this study are a selection of the ideas Paul covered in this passage. In your own time, consider re-reading the passage and seeing how else this passage may be relevant in your life.

# LIVE IN HARMONY WITH ONE ANOTHER

ROMANS 12:14-21

## Context

In the last study, Paul gave us advice on how a Christian should live, particularly, with love. This week, we continue with the remainder of Romans 12, which explains how we should treat those that persecute us.

## Observations and Meaning

Verse 14 says to bless those that persecute you, rather than curse them. This seems contradictory to what God commands in the Old Testament to the Jews, often loosely summarised as 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' (see Exo. 21:22-24). Comments such as this may give some people the impression that the God of the Old Testament is somehow different from the God of the New Testament.

1. Paying particular attention to the phrase 'as the judges determine' in Exo. 21:22, how can we reconcile this apparent difference? Also consider other relevant passages (e.g. Matt. 5:38-42, Rom. 12:19) in your discussion.
2. Paul asks us to seek God's blessing for those who persecute us, not merely to not retaliate or even to forgive them. How difficult do you find this appeal and what do you think may help you accomplish this?

To ask that we seek God's blessing for those who persecute us seems like a monumental task. Indeed, no other worldview has a theological construct as profoundly selfless as that found in Christianity. Atheism holds no logical basis for altruism; many religions have rules in place as compensation for

bad behaviour, but no religious system dares to demand the equivalent of absolute altruism in response to persecution, except Christianity.

What makes Christianity unique among worldviews is that it is based on historical fact - the literal, physical death and resurrection of Jesus, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in each of us. These alone give us the possibility of adequately responding to Paul's appeal. To sincerely pray for God's blessings for our enemies, we need to be thoroughly convinced of, and grateful for, Jesus' sacrifice for us on the cross all the time, so that our gratitude may flow out even on to our enemies. It would not be surprising if, for most of us, this will take a lifetime of practice. May we be encouraged by the examples of Jesus, Paul, Stephen and the other apostles and emulate their love for our enemies (Luke 23:34, Acts 7:60, 1 Cor. 4:12-13).

In verse 15, Paul asks us to empathise with each other, and share our joys and sorrows. Some people are naturally better at this than others.

3. Have you ever felt it is difficult to share in someone's joys or sorrows? What reasons do you think may have contributed to this difficulty?

In both verses 16 and 18, Paul encourages us to live in harmony with each other. In verse 18, he also wisely points out that peace is dependent on all parties, not just ourselves, but nevertheless we should always do our part to maintain harmony.

4. What does harmony between people look like to you, and why is it important to maintain harmony? If disagreements occur, should we pretend that there is no disagreement rather than address the issue and risk conflict? (See also Matt. 18:15-22; Luke 17:3-4)

5. Looking at the passage as a whole, what do you think Paul was ultimately trying to achieve by encouraging the Romans to do these things? How does Jesus' life serve as an example for us in light of this passage?

Throughout this entire passage, we can see that every exhortation listed is based on the underlying principle of loving your neighbour (or enemy) as yourself, from blessing your enemies, associating with the lowly, to empathising with others, all of which require us to be humble. That doesn't mean we shouldn't acknowledge disagreements in order to work them out. Rather, we need to make sure we have the right goal in mind so that we can resolve conflicts with maturity.

### **Application**

6. Christina has a colleague at work, Kevin, who is outspoken about his negative views toward Christianity. Christina does not engage in much conversation with Kevin, so she is unsure if he is aware that she is a Christian, though she does mention her church activities when other people ask her about her weekend. Today, she also received news that he got the job promotion that both of them, among others, had applied for. As other people approach Kevin to congratulate him, Christina is conflicted about how she should respond.

How should Christians react to this news? What practical advice could you give her to help her handle this situation with humility and maturity?

# SUBMIT TO THE AUTHORITIES

ROMANS 13:1-7

## Context

In our last study we talked about how we should love each other, with a focus on loving those who persecute us. This week, we discuss the issue of submitting to authorities in this world. This issue was particularly relevant to the Christians in Rome because at this point in history, there were no Christian authorities in existence. The Roman or Jewish authorities were largely unfriendly to Christians. Furthermore, Rome was the seat of power of a vast empire, so many Jewish Christians thought acknowledging Caesar as king, or paying taxes to support the Roman empire, was against their values and offensive to God (see Deut. 17:15). This may have even caused some Christians to participate in revolts against the empire, stirring up unrest. Paul, therefore, had reason to address this issue.

## Observations and Meaning

Paul begins by bluntly answering the question “Should we listen to earthly authorities?” with a firm “Yes, we should.” Paul explains that it is so because God is the one true authority in this world, and all other authorities have been appointed by Him (v. 1).

1. Do you find it difficult to believe this statement, that God has appointed all other authorities (v. 1)? What about all the corrupt, self-serving governments in many parts of the world, or that unreasonable superior of yours? Surely doing good won’t always receive their approval (v. 3)? (See also Daniel 2:20; Prov. 21:1; and Matthew 28:18)
2. Is there any point at which resisting authority may be permissible (v. 2)? (See also Acts 4:13-22; Acts 5:27-32; Daniel 3:8-30; and Daniel 6)



In the last study, Paul talked about not taking revenge into your own hands, but leaving it up to God. However, now Paul is saying the worldly authorities can avenge on behalf of God (v. 4)!

3. Does this mean that if you're in a position of authority, you are allowed to 'carry out God's wrath' on your subordinates?

Paul is asserting here that all authority, and even the existence of governments and organisations, is derived from God's authority. Therefore, as part being in a position of authority, rulers are also granted the responsibility to ensure that the organisational system runs smoothly, along with the power to mete out punishment if necessary. Notice that it is the responsibility of the position that should cause people in positions of authority to act. Someone in power should not 'mete out justice' because they were personally offended, nor should they try to overstep their boundaries by punishing subordinates for 'offences' that are not within their jurisdiction. All leaders should have a sober awareness of their authority as a derivation of God's authority, so that they can lead with wisdom.

Therefore, the job of one in authority is often not an easy one. As Christians, we should submit ourselves to authority willingly, and do our part to maintain the healthy workings of the organisation, whether it is through paying taxes or honour and respect to the authorities (v. 7).

4. Twice in this passage the Apostle Paul considers the governing authorities as 'the servants of God' (v. 4). In verse 6, Paul also affirmatively points out that they are 'ministers of God.' In what way the governing authorities are God's servants or ministers? How does it affect the way we conduct ourselves before the governing authorities? (See also 2 Chr. 19:4-7; Matt. 22:15-22; 1 Peter 2:13-17; 1 Tim. 2:1-2; Prov. 21:1; Psalm 22:28)

## **Application**

5. Jaywalking is an offence in Australia. Do you jaywalk? If so, in light of this passage, do you think you would continue to jaywalk? Why or why not? Can you think of any other 'controversial' offences?

6. Charlotte received news that her local government plans to enact a number of new laws, including the legalisation of polygamy and the increase of public transportation fees. She does not believe the government should enact these new laws. Knowing this, her friend Sophie invites her to some public protests, each aimed at one of these proposed new laws.

As a Christian, should Charlotte participate in any of these public protests? What factors should influence her decision?

# WALK PROPERLY WITH ONE ANOTHER

ROMANS 13:8-14

## Context

In the previous study, Paul was talking about how to live properly under earthly authorities and the relationship Christians should have with the state or rulers. In this section, he transitions to talking about how to live day-to-day with each other.

## Observations

1. In verses 8-10, Paul summarises the law and the second half of the Ten Commandments in one sentence: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." How does a loving attitude towards others help us obey the commandments? (See also Matthew 22:34-40; 1 John 4:19-21)
2. What reason does Paul give in verses 11-13 for why it is important for us to change our behaviour from "works of darkness" to walking properly? (c. ref. John 9:4)

## Meaning

3. In verse 13, Paul names three pairs of vices: "orgies and drunkenness", "sexual immorality and sensuality", "quarrelling and jealousy" (ESV). How could these types of behaviour distract us from:
  - a. Loving our neighbours as ourselves?
  - b. Realising that the time is nearing for Jesus to return and judgement to come?

## Application

4. Jane and Peter are co-workers and good friends. They are also the only Christians in their workplace, which helps them form a bond. Recently, Peter got passed over for a promotion to be a manager, and he's been very unhappy, arguing sharply with the person who just got promoted instead of him. In the meantime, Jane has been trying to flirt with the new manager, taking him out for drinks and hoping to wine and dine him in order to get a good project. This makes Peter even more upset, and their friendship is now under strain.
  - a. What are the underlying attitudes that are driving Jane's and Peter's behaviour?
  - b. In verse 14, Paul says to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ", and to "make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires" (ESV). What would those two things look like in practice, in Jane's and Peter's lives?
5. What could you do in *your* life to "put on the Lord Jesus Christ", and "make no provision for the flesh to gratify its desires"? (See also Galatians 3:23-27; Colossians 3:5-11; Ephesians 4:17-24)
6. Verses 8 and 10 say that "love is the fulfilling of the law". Some people have said that practising homosexuality and same-sex marriage is okay in God's eyes because it is based on love. How might you respond to that statement?

# DON'T PASS JUDGMENT ON ONE ANOTHER

ROMANS 14:1-12

## Context

The uniqueness of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that people from any background and any walk of life may hear the gospel, believe, be saved, and be included into God's family. In Romans 14, Paul talks about how we should treat one another in the community of believers, especially those who are from different religious and worldview background.

## Observations

1. Paul refers to some people as those who are 'weak in faith,' hence consequently there are others who are stronger in faith. In the context of this chapter, what do you think Paul is referring to as 'weak in faith'? In our context today, what kind of believers is Paul referring to?
2. What do you think Paul means here when he speaks of 'passing judgement' (vv. 3 and 4)? (See also Col. 2:16-23)

## Meaning

In verses 2-6, Paul seems to imply that different practices of living out our faith are to be "welcomed" (v. 3) or "accepted" (NIV) by different types of believers, using the differences around food consumption and sacred days as examples.

3. In verse 5b, Paul mentions that "each should be convinced in his own mind". What do you think that means? How can you align your own conviction with God's?

4. Read verses 4, 7-11. What are the key principles here that would help in guiding us to consider how we treat or welcome other “strong” and “weak” Christians?

## **Application**

5. As believers we are called to welcome other believers and not to pass judgement on disputable matters (v. 2). How do we discern what is essential and non-essential to our faith?
6. You’ve invited your friend (who is a believer) to CrossCulture this week, and after the service you’re in a restaurant having a meal together. You ask your friend how she found the service. Her key observations (amongst others) were as follows:
  - a. At church we usually have a great worship atmosphere with an organ playing hymns. I noticed you guys have a lot of use of drums and guitars, I feel that this might disturb the worship atmosphere which should be peaceful? Worship to me is a really reflective time.
  - b. I’m a bit unsure about communion. At my church, the priest or minister hands us the biscuit and wine, and I would drink from the cup and he would wipe it after. I noticed you guys do communion individually sitting at your chairs. How come the pastor doesn’t lead you all together into communion?

How would you respond? How should we interact with believers from other congregations who might have different practices?

# DON'T CAUSE ONE ANOTHER TO STUMBLE

ROMANS 14:13-23

## Context

In the last study, Paul spoke about how we should welcome those who are 'weak in faith' (Rom. 14:1) and not to pass judgement upon them (vv. 3-4). Paul also spoke about the importance of being convinced in your own mind and how we should use that to honor God.

In this study, we look into how we should not be a stumbling block or hindrance for other believers. Paul continues using, as a practical example, the theme of food as a hindrance to how we can relate to others.

## Observations

1. If we are doing things that we consider are 'right' with God, how could this possibly be a stumbling block for others?
2. In verse 14, Paul mentions that he is persuaded that nothing is unclean. How does Paul reach this conclusion? Are you persuaded like Paul? (See also Acts 10:9-16; Mark 7:14-23)

## Meaning

3. What does Paul mean by 'destroying' a brother as mentioned in verses 15 and 20? Would 'destroying' a brother mean condemnation in hell? The passage also mentions 'stumbling', is this the same as destroying? (See also 1 Cor. 8)

4. Verse 19 calls us to pursue peace and mutual upbuilding instead of destroying others. Likewise verse 17 speaks of joy and peace in the holy spirit being important to God. How can we as Christians achieve this? How should this look when considering the relationship between 'strong' and 'weak' Christians?

## **Application**

5. How might we be a stumbling block or hindrance to others in our lives without realising? In your community context, what practices that you usually do that might cause others to stumble?
  
6. John and Emily are dating. They both wish to go on a holiday together overseas, and do not intend to bring other friends. Each in their own mind is convinced that they will remain sexually pure, are able to resist any temptation that may arise and therefore see no issue. Mark and Lisa, their Christian friends, are also in a relationship. Upon hearing of John and Emily's holiday plans, Mark and Lisa expressed concern because they didn't believe couples should travel alone before they are married.

In light of our discussion above, what do you think John and Emily should do?



# WELCOME ONE ANOTHER

ROMANS 15:1-13

## Context

This passage is the final part of Paul's teachings about weak and strong believers in the letter to the Romans. Historical sources have indicated that there were likely several house churches in Rome who had mixed Jewish and Gentile congregations. Although Paul had not visited the Roman churches yet, as a Jewish apostle to the Gentiles, he wrote this section of his letter to convey his thoughts and perspectives of how these two groups of people should be interacting as a church community.

One group – the Jews – had a rich spiritual tradition that this new Christian faith was drawing a lot from. The Scriptures of the early church were Jewish Scriptures. The Jewish Christians already had the spiritual background to understand the character of God, and the role of Jesus as the prophesied Messiah. From childhood, they were raised in families that taught them about God.

On the other hand, the Gentiles came into Christianity without knowing much. They came from all kinds of other religious backgrounds, with different kinds of religious practices and beliefs about what God is like, and what sort of behaviour might be considered holy or unholy. As new converts, they had to let go of past teachings from their previous faiths, and re-learn from scratch what it meant to be “the people of God” and part of His Kingdom.

This same pattern can be seen in the modern church today, between believers who were raised in Christian families with rich spiritual resources for growth, and those who converted to Christianity from non-Christian backgrounds who had to learn everything from the basics. In chapter 14, Paul talked about what not to do when the believers had disagreements about different ways of honouring God. Here in chapter 15, he focuses on what they should be doing instead.

## Observations and Meaning

1. Paul urges those that are spiritually-strong to “bear with” (support or carry) those who are weak, by pleasing their neighbours rather than themselves. (vv. 1-3)
  - a. What’s the difference between the “pleasing” described here, and being a “people-pleaser” who does whatever other people want of them? (see also Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:1-6)
  - b. What was the ultimate goal or end result of this process that Paul wanted to see in them?
2. Paul points to Christ as an example to us in verses 7-12. What was the purpose of Christ’s servanthood to (a) the Jews (i.e. “the circumcised”), and (b) the Gentiles? How did it match the spiritual needs of those two people groups?
3. Paul uses three specific words repeatedly when describing God and Scripture in verses 4-5 and 13. How do each of these qualities help people bear with each other’s weaknesses? How does it help to know that God is the source of these qualities?

## Application

4. **Group Activity:** Many people from different spiritual or social backgrounds accept Christ and need to learn how to be a Christian from others in the church. Pick 2-3 people groups from the table below (or come up with some of your own) and discuss:

- a. How they might view God or religious practices (e.g. prayer, fellowship) differently?
- b. What challenges, questions or spiritual needs these people might have?
- c. What are appropriate ways to help build up spiritually-struggling believers who come from these backgrounds?

Remember that this discussion is not meant to look down on people who might come from these backgrounds as “weak”, but rather to lovingly and sensitively consider ways to build up our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ as we all journey together.

Buddhist family	Hindu family	Muslim family	Taoist / Confucian family
Hardcore atheist family	Non-religious family	Aboriginal- Australian spiritual beliefs	Other traditional folk religion / shamans
Non-practising Christian family	Someone who just got out of a cult	Extremely poor / uneducated family	Extremely rich family
Someone abandoned by their family	Someone with a long-term severe illness	Someone dealing with personality disorders	Someone dealing with dangerous addictions
Homeless / refugee	Prisoner / criminal	Social rebel / non-conformist	

# STRIVING TOGETHER FOR THE GOSPEL

ROMANS 15:14-33

## Context

The letter of Romans was written by Paul to introduce himself and his ministry to the churches in Rome, which he had yet to visit. Most scholars place the letter as being written when Paul was ministering in Corinth during his third missionary journey, around 56 A.D. He had met Aquila and Priscilla, who had come from Rome, and ministered together with them in Corinth and Ephesus (Acts 18). At the time, he was busy raising funds among the various churches in Macedonia and Achaia (provinces in Greece) to bring financial aid to the Christians in Jerusalem.

Unlike his other letters, Paul's letter to the Romans doesn't deal with problems within the church. Instead, it's a comprehensive statement of his theology and beliefs about Christian life and ministry, written for mature believers willing to think about heavier and deeper spiritual topics.

1. What impression do you have of the Christians in Rome? What made Paul so sure that this letter would be understood and well-received by the churches there? (v. 14; see also Romans 1:8, Acts 18:1-4, 24-26)

## Observations and Meaning

2. Paul makes a very clear statement about his ministry calling and ambitions here.
  - a. How would you describe what Paul's ministry and mission was? (vv. 16-21; see also 1 Corinthians 3:6,10)
  - b. How does this explain why he kept getting side-tracked away from Rome, but eventually manages to find a way to visit them? (vv. 20-24)

3. Paul also talks about the reasoning behind him taking financial aid from the Gentile Christians in Macedonia and Achaia to the Jewish Christians at Jerusalem (vv. 25-27). After the debate in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, it was decided that circumcision (practised by the Jews but not by the Gentiles) would no longer be a necessary sign of a believer's faith in Christ. There was no longer any particular unifying symbol that marked all Christians.
  - a. How does this action by the Gentiles in Macedonia and Achaia help unify the churches worldwide? (see also John 13:34-35; Acts 2:42-47; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5)
  - b. How would this act of giving help the spread of the Gospel, in Jerusalem as well as other parts of the world?
4. Paul invites the Roman Christians to get involved in his Gospel ministry work. What specifically does he ask them to do? (vv. 24, 30-32) Note that the word he uses in verse 30 is translated as "strive" (or "struggle"). What does that tell you about the nature of prayer and its role in ministry work and evangelism?

## **Application**

5. There were three ways of getting involved in the spread of the Gospel mentioned in this passage: Paul's travelling and preaching, the Macedonians and Achaians giving financial aid to support believers who were in need, and the Romans striving in prayer and providing a base to reach Spain. What role do you see yourself playing in the spread of the Gospel?

6. The church sends out many Global Partners to do mission work around the world. We encourage all Life Groups to support at least one Global Partner. As a Life Group, take time to consider perhaps adopting a Global Partner if you have not yet done so, or reviewing your current level of support for the Global Partners you already have. What can you do as a collective group to help support the spread of the Gospel further?

# GREET ONE ANOTHER

ROMANS 16:1-16

## Context

Apostle Paul typically ends his epistles with his own greetings and an encouragement for the church to greet one another (e.g., 1 Cor. 16:19-20; 2 Cor. 13:12-13; Philippians 4:21-23; Col. 4:7-18; 1 Thess. 5:26; 2 Tim. 4:19-21; Titus 3:15; Philemon 23-25; Heb. 13:24). His letter to the Christians in Rome is no exception. However, the Apostle Paul's instruction in Romans 16:1-16 is the lengthiest among all of his epistles, and he mentions as many as 25 individual names - more here than in other epistles - for the Roman Christians to greet.

If you read it at a glance, you will find this passage merely a list of unknown names. It is easy for us to go through it just for the sake of reading it. However, just like the genealogies we find in Old and New Testaments, if we pause and take time to ponder, we will realise that there is so much we can learn in this passage.

John Chrysostom, a 4th-century early church father, wrote this about Romans 16:1-16: "I think that many even of those who have the appearance of being extremely good men, hasten over this part of the epistle as superfluous ... Yet 'the gold founders' people are careful even about the little fragments ... it is possible even from bare names to find a great treasure."<sup>2</sup>

## Observations

Romans 16:1-16 can be divided into two separate sections: (1) The commendation of Phoebe (vv. 1-2) and (2) a long list of greetings to Paul's friends and helpers living in the capital city (vv. 3-16).<sup>3</sup>

1. What can you learn about Phoebe by observing Paul's commendation of Phoebe in verses 1-2?

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<sup>2</sup> Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 392.

<sup>3</sup> R. H. Mounce, *Romans*, Vol. 27 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995), 271.

The word 'patron' in ESV is from the Greek word *prostatis*. It means 'a woman who is active in helping (in the sense of one engaged in supporting an individual or endeavor).'<sup>4</sup> A patron is a person who contributes to the fulfilment of a need or furtherance of an effort or purpose, especially with his or her financial resources.

2. Go through the list of people in verses 3-16. What are some of the things that stand out to you?

## Meaning

A further investigation on the names in the list bears some interesting information. Aquila and Priscilla were Jewish Christians (Acts 18:2), and the word 'kinsmen' (vv. 7 and 11) more likely refers to the Jewish people (cf. Acts 9:3). On the other hand, many other names on the list are quite clearly Gentiles. Ancient inscriptions indicate that Ampliatus (v. 8), Urbanus (v. 9), Hermes (v. 14), Philologus and Julia (v. 15) were common names for slaves. Meanwhile, commentators consider it quite likely that the Aristobulus (v. 10) was the grandson of Herod the Great and friend of Emperor Claudius, and that Narcissus (v. 11) was none other than the well-known, rich and powerful freedman who exercised great influence on Claudius. Furthermore, nine of the people in the list of greetings were women: Priscilla (v. 3), Mary (v. 6), probably Junia (v. 7), Tryphena and Tryphosa, who may have been twin sisters, and Persis (v. 12), Rufus' mother (v. 13), Julia and Nereus' sister (v. 15). Out of the nine, Paul singles out four (Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis) as having 'worked hard'.<sup>5</sup>

3. What does this tell you about the nature of the Christian church in Rome (see also Eph. 3:1-6)?

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<sup>4</sup> J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida, *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 458.

<sup>5</sup> Stott, *The Message of Romans*, 395-397.



4. Alongside the diversity in race, rank, and gender, what evidence can you find in the text that shows that the Roman Christians experienced a profound unity? (see also Gal. 3:28)

## **Application**

5. Having observed and understood the Roman church's unity in diversity as displayed in Rom. 16:1-16, what does this mean for us practically in the church, in your life group, and in your personal life?
6. The word 'greet' does not simply mean saying, "Hi, how are you?" or "Good day, mate!" The original Greek word has a sense of 'welcoming kindly', 'embracing', 'saluting', and 'receiving with joy'.<sup>6</sup> Many of those whom Paul wants the Roman Christians to 'greet' are said to be fellow workers who work hard in the Lord.

Consider a scenario where Paula is one of the missionaries that your church has sent. As a missionary working in a creative access nation (where one cannot proclaim the gospel openly), Paula often feels isolated and lonely. At times, Paula has seriously considered going home and giving up being a missionary. What do you think you, or your life group, can do to 'greet' Paula?

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<sup>6</sup> cf. H. G. Liddell, R. Scott, H. S. Jones, & R. McKenzie, A Greek-English lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 258.

# PROTECT ONE ANOTHER

ROMANS 16:17-27

## Context

In Romans 16:1-16, Paul gives a list of people that he wants Roman Christians to greet, including one another (v. 16). It does seem fitting that his letter ends with verse 16. However, Paul begins verse 17 the same way he opens the second major section of Romans Epistle (chapters 12 - 16): “I appeal to you, brothers” (Rom. 12:1; 16:17). It is as if Paul wants the Roman Christians to know one more thing before he properly ends his letter with some final greetings (vv. 21-23) and doxology (vv. 25-27).

The main subject of verses 17 to 20 is regarding false teachers. After instructing the Roman Christians to embrace and welcome one another, regardless of one’s race, rank, and gender, Paul moves to give them a firm warning when it comes to a particular group of people. What Paul says here provides some helpful instructions about how one should discern and treat false teachers.

## Observations

1. What are some characteristics of ‘false teachers’ as described by Paul in verses 17-19? What are Paul’s instructions for the Roman Christians with regards to false teachers (vv. 17-20)?
2. What aspect of God is the focus of Paul’s doxology in verses 25-27? And why do you think that is in light of the whole epistle?

## Meaning

3. In Romans 16:16, Paul instructs the Roman Christians to greet one another with a holy kiss. In Romans 14:1 - 15:13, Paul carefully asks them to welcome one another, especially those who are weak in their

faith, just as Christ has welcomed them. Further back in Romans 12:10, Paul commands them to love one another with brotherly affection.

In light of the above commandments, do Paul's instructions in verses 17-20 sound too harsh or even inconsistent? How is this different from the passages mentioned above? (See also 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 6:3-5; Gal. 1:6-10; 2 John 8-11)

4. What is the significance of '*The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet*' (v. 20a) in light of what Paul is saying in verses 17-20? (See also Gen. 3:15; Luke 10:17-19; Rev. 12:10-11)
5. There are a number of people who send their greetings to the Roman Christians (vv. 21-23). What does this tell you about the nature of Paul's missionary work? What does it mean for us today?

## **Application**

6. Brandon has been part of your life group for some time now. For the past couple of months, however, Brandon began to bring up an idea that someone can only be saved if he or she perfectly obeys specific commandments and carefully refrains from certain habits. As the weeks went by, Brandon became more confident of his conviction, and began to bring up the issue more and more in each life group meeting.

As a fellow life group member, what do you think you should do? (See also Matt. 18:15-20; Titus 3:9-11; 2 Thess. 3:14-15; James 5:19-20)

Paul ends his letter with the following doxology (i.e., a short hymn of praise to God).

*Romans 16:25–27 (ESV)*

*<sup>25</sup> Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages <sup>26</sup> but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith— <sup>27</sup> to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

Together in your life group, close the Bible study by reading and meditating upon this doxology, and thinking about what this doxology means to you now.