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Studies in Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview

Lesson Eleven

A Lifestyle of Worship

Focal Text

Romans 12

Background

Romans 12

Main Idea

Our response to the gospel should result in a lifestyle of worship.

Question to Explore

How can I pursue a lifestyle of worship?

Quick Read

We live a life of worship by renewing our minds, using our spiritual gifts, and sincerely loving one another.

Introduction

Normally, I save the best for last. It just makes sense to build toward an ending that will stick with the reader. But this is too good. So I begin with the best.

Some years ago, I spoke at a student camp. On the last night, I taught from Romans 12:1-2. The outline I taught from is the same one we will look at in this lesson. The entire worship service was right on target. The worship leader chose both songs we knew and a few we had learned during the week. The students were very attentive. They always were. I knew this group well for I had led their camp over several summers. But this particular night was different. There was a sense of urgency among us. I recognized the presence of the Spirit of God in our midst.

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I thought my message was well-received. I have never been one to ratchet up people's emotions and I have always been especially careful when speaking to students. I want commitments to be made because of God's leading and not my manipulation.

I offered an invitation at the close of my teaching. We gathered in a chapel where there were steps leading up to the platform. I encouraged the students and leaders to feel free to come and kneel on the steps to pray. Those few minutes were a spontaneous, joyful, and emotional time as lines of faith were crossed and prayers were answered.

When the worship time concluded, we dismissed the campers for an outside, late-evening time of fellowship. Several of us stayed in the chapel to straighten things up and to begin packing up our sound equipment. I noticed an envelope on the steps. I thought it was a piece of scratch paper when I picked it up to toss it in the trash. But it wasn't litter. It was an offering envelope.

In the midst of all the moving to and from the altar steps, I assumed the envelope had slipped out of someone's Bible. It had the church's name printed on it. This was no surprise. Then I noticed instead of a name written across the front, it was addressed to God with that day's date written across the top. The envelope was sealed. Did that stop me? Of course not. I took it to the student minister and we both agreed—we would open the envelope.

Inside we found no money, so I concluded there was no offering. I was wrong. The envelope contained a note from one of the high school boys in the youth group. I cannot recall the exact wording but the following is very close to what this young man wrote: "God. I give to you what you have asked me to give. I give my life as an offering to you." We both stood there, amazed at what God had done in many lives that night, but especially in one young man who "got it." He understood what service and sacrifice were all about.

I believed all along it was my job to inspire these young people to deepen their commitment to Jesus. I never thought a young man would teach me something I have never, never forgotten.

Commentary

Our outline of Romans.¹

Salutation (1:1-17)

Paul, a Servant of Jesus Christ (1:1-7)

Thanksgiving and Prayer Request (1:8-15)

Theme: the Righteousness of God (1:16-17)

The Sinfulness of Men (1:18-3:20)

Pagan Lostness (1:18-32)
Jewish Lostness (2:1-3:20)

The Grace of God (3:21-8:39)
The Heart of the Gospel (3:21-4:25)
Made Right with God (5:1-6:23)
Living in the Spirit (7:1-8:39)

The Destiny of Israel (9:1-11:36)
Paul's Lament (9:1-5)
God's Sovereignty (9:6-29)
Israel's Responsibility (9:30-10:21)
Israel's Hope (11:1-36)

The Pattern of Discipleship (12:1-15:13)
Call to Commitment (12:1-2)
Charismatic Gifts (12:3-8)
Personal Relationships (12:9-21)

The focus of this lesson is Romans 12:1-21.

Call to Commitment (12:1-2)

I have yet to find an outline of these two verses that describe commitment better than that of J. W. MacGorman.²

12:1-2. The Greatest Sacrifice—your very Selves
The Greatest Motivation—the Mercies of God
The Greatest Threat—the Pressure to Conform to this World
The Greatest Discovery—the Will of God

Paul began this section with the word “Therefore.” This term looked back to everything he wrote in chapters 1-11. A careful look reveals Paul described important theological truths (1-11), and then applied those teachings to practical everyday living (12-16).

Illustration: Paul spoke in superlatives here, e.g. “the greatest.” I am one of those who speak in such a manner. I came by this honestly. The pastor I grew up under always spoke in superlatives. Everything was the best, the most, the greatest, or sometimes, the worst. As I grew up, I naturally began to see and describe things in this way. This hamburger is the best I have ever tasted. Why? Because it’s the one I am eating now.

In my teaching the New Testament to seminary students, I always introduced the day’s lecture in the following way: “Class, today we are going to cover the greatest passage in God’s word. The reason I say this is because this is the passage we are studying today. Wherever you find yourself in the Bible is always the best, the greatest passage ever.”

One of my classes presented me with a Bible at the end of the term. They affectionately pasted a card on the front that said, The Hatfield Study Bible. On the inside cover was the preferred study method: "Turn to any page and know you are studying the greatest verses in the Bible."

The greatest sacrifice is not money or any possession. It is the giving of one's life in service to God. There is no substitute, though many attempt to bargain with God when they face the call to commit.

What could inspire one to make this greatest sacrifice but the mercies of God? Some translations render the noun "mercies" as "mercy." Paul could not speak of God's mercy without remembering the many ways God blessed his life.

The greatest threat we face when giving our lives completely to God is to conform to the present age. The world will attempt to squeeze us into its mold. The word "conformed" is based on the Greek word for "scheme." The power of evil schemes and plots to pull us away from our divine destiny. God gives us the strength to be transformed, not conformed to the ways of the world.

The word rendered "transformed" when pronounced in the Greek language is "metamorphosis." This word has a familiar sound. It refers to the changing of a tadpole into a frog or a caterpillar into a butterfly. In each case, the tadpole and the caterpillar change form. This is what happens when we focus on God. The renewing of our minds results in our being transformed into what God wants us to be.

Illustration: We are familiar with two simple household items: a thermometer and a thermostat. A thermometer is only a recorder of temperature. It reflects how hot or how cold it is on a given day. It is useful in letting us know about the weather, but that's it.

A thermostat not only reflects the temperature but goes another step. By turning the dial, the temperature can be changed. This instrument is designed to do something about the temperature. As Paul spoke to his Roman audience, he knew they would be either reflectors of the culture around them or they could become those rare individuals who try to do something positive in the world they live in.³

The greatest discovery in this process is the will of God. This is what every person seeks. We speak of obedience when describing how one can know God's will. The first-century reader focused on sacrifice as the heart of religion. Most of us think of sacrifice as primitive. We cannot relate to those who obsessed over the slaughter of animals as a means to obtain spiritual growth.

Charismatic Gifts (12:3-8)

The giving and practicing of spiritual gifts has caused much dissension and frustration among God's children. Denominations have been born as a result of this controversy.

Most of the misunderstandings center upon the term “charismatic.” This is the Greek word translated “gifts” in this passage. In years past, many people identified speaking in tongues and healing as “charismatic” practices.

A church I pastored years ago had gone through a split over this issue. Though this occurred years before, emotions would quickly boil over whenever it was discussed. When I visited with some of the folks who were involved, you would think there were people hopping over pews and babbling incessantly. I found it difficult to teach and to encourage a biblical understanding of spiritual gifts.

People have misapplied and twisted Paul’s words here. This is tragic because a proper understanding of spiritual gifts will enable believers to grow and will enable churches to fulfill their mission to make disciples.

The Nature of the Church: One Body in Christ (12:3-5)

12:4-5. Paul set the stage for a discussion of spiritual gifts when he compared the church to the human body. Just as the human body has many “working parts,” so the church—the body of Christ—functions best when each believer exercises his/her spiritual gift(s).

In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul used a little bit of humor to make his point:

If the foot says, ‘Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear says, ‘Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,’ it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? (1 Cor. 12:15-17).

Paul’s point was clear. Believers should focus on using their gift, not comparing themselves to someone else. The goal was cooperation, not competition.

The Variety and Use of Charismatic Gifts (12:6-8)

A comprehensive picture of spiritual gifts is problematic because there is no complete listing of gifts in one passage in the New Testament. Some interpreters use 1 Corinthians 12:4-7 as a framework for organizing the gifts. This passage refers to the “varieties of gifts” (1 Cor. 12:4), “varieties of ministries” (1 Cor. 12:5), and “varieties of effects” (1 Cor. 12:6).

Following this line of interpretation, Paul listed seven motivational gifts: prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and mercy (Romans 12:6-8). Every believer possesses one or more of these foundational gifts. When a believer discovers their gift and puts it into practice, then ministries and effects follow.

Six of these gifts need little explanation. One of them—prophecy—deserves some attention. Most people define prophecy as telling the future. Though the gift of prophecy

includes an emphasis on what will happen in the future, its basic focus is forth-telling, not fore-telling. A person who has the gift of prophecy does not go around predicting when Jesus will return. This person boldly, and perhaps bluntly, tells the truth.

Other interpreters favor a more broad approach, taking every example of spiritual gifts in the New Testament and grouping them together. Whatever view you prefer, the ultimate goal is the same: Every believer has a gift or gifts to use in building up the body of Christ. These gifts are not intended for vocational ministers only.

Personal Relationships (12:9-21)

Spiritual gifts appear above (12:6-8). The commands in these verses apply to all believers. They read like proverbial sayings, where each can stand on its own. Paul went back and forth between commands concerning how believers relate to other believers (12:9-13, 15-16) and how they should treat unbelievers (12:14, 17-21). He quoted the Old Testament (12:19-20) and much of what he said can be found in Jewish wisdom literature outside of the Old Testament. The content found in 12:14, 17, 18, and 21 repeat the very teachings of Jesus. Paul took what he knew of Jesus' instruction and included it in his advice to the Romans.

12:9-13. These verses focus on how believers should treat one another. Translations insert the verb in the phrase "let love be without hypocrisy" (12:9). Literally the phrase says "sincere love." Paul may have used this phrase as a general heading for what follows.

Paul employed another term for "love" in 12:10. "Phileo" denoted brotherly affection. The city of Philadelphia is known as the city of brotherly love. Christians should show to one another the same degree of love and respect that can be found in the best of families. This included a willingness to serve others.

Hospitality (12:13) was sorely needed in a time when hotels and inns were virtually non-existent. Believers depended upon one another for lodging and food when traveling. Paul urged the Romans to open their homes to one another without reservation.

12:14-21. These verses outline how believers should relate to non-believers, though some of Paul's advice can apply to how believers treat one another.

The words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) are evident in Paul's command for believers to bless those who do them harm.

Illustration: A man was found unconscious on a city street. He was taken to a hospital for treatment. When he regained consciousness, the man began to berate and curse any and all who tried to help him. He became so belligerent that most of the caregivers avoided him completely—except for one nurse. She continued day after day to bring his meds, to bathe him, to change the sheets on his bed in spite of all the verbal abuse he directed at

*her. On the day he was discharged, this nurse stopped by to tell him goodbye and to wish him well. As she turned to leave, the man asked: "I have cursed and insulted and treated you horribly. All the others avoided me. Why not you?" She responded, "God loves you and I felt that he wanted to love you through me."*⁴

This is how we should respond to those who mistreat and abuse us.

Our lives could be changed for the better if we could practice "rejoicing with those who rejoice, and weeping with those who weep" (12:15).

Illustration: A Chinese proverb tells about a woman who lost her only son. In great grief, she sought out a holy man and asked if there was any way to bring her son back to life. He responded with a task. "Find a home where there has never been sorrow and then I will drive the sorrow out of your life."

The grief-stricken mother set off at once to find a family that had never experienced sorrow. She passed a magnificent mansion, knocked on the door and asked, "I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place?"

"No," the woman at the door replied. "You have come to the wrong place." She then described all the heartache and tragedy that had befallen them. The woman said to herself, "Who better to help these people than me, for I know by experience what they are enduring." So she stayed to comfort them, then went on her way to continue her search.

*Everywhere she went she found family after family who had suffered misery, heartache, and tragedy. She became so involved in ministering to the grief of others that she forgot about her own tragic loss. Her journey had provided the answer to her sorrow.*⁵

God cares about the poor and rejected (12:16). So should we. Too many of us are "legends in our own minds." We need a dose of humility. And humility is something we are commanded to pursue.

Paul quoted Proverbs 25:21-22 in Romans 12:19-20. The command to leave vengeance in the hands of God is easy to understand. But when speaking about someone who has mistreated you, what about "heaping burning coals on his head"? In the Old Testament, "fire" and "coals" usually represent God's all-consuming judgment. But here it appears the "burning coals" have a positive effect upon unbelievers. This obscure phrase probably means the doing of good to those who harm us will produce remorse in the life of our enemies and ultimately lead them to repent. These pangs of conscience are motivated by acts of kindness, not acts of aggression. When we repay unkindness with love, good things can happen.

Conclusion

MacGorman states: “The world at its worst returns evil for good. The world at its best returns good for good and evil for evil. But the follower of Jesus Christ is commanded to return good for evil.”⁶ Is this possible for us today? How can we put into practice the commands Paul gave us in Romans 12?

Discover your spiritual gift. The church cannot reach its community, much less the world, unless every member participates. There are resources available to help you develop the gifts God has given you. There is a difference between a spiritual gift and a natural talent. Too many times we equate a beautiful singing voice with a spiritual gift and conclude that if we can’t sing, then we are not gifted. This is poor logic and a misinterpretation of Scripture. A person may use their voice to exhort or teach, but the talent itself is not the gift.

Practice hospitality. You don’t have to be a gourmet cook before you can have people in your home. You don’t have to have a spotless house. You live in your house. It’s not a museum exhibit. Scattered toys can put guests at ease when you have them over.

Make the greatest sacrifice. Give your life, every facet of your life, to God’s work. If you do, your life will be great.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Stephen G. Hatfield

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¹J. W. MacGorman, “Romans” *The Layman’s Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 9-10.

²*Ibid.*, 82-83.

³James E. Hightower, Jr, Compiler, *Illustrating Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 85.

⁴*Ibid.*, 94.

⁵*Ibid.*, 94-95.

⁶MacGorman, 86.