

## A New Way of Living

*[Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. 3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.]*

**Romans 12:6** *Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; 7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering; or he that teacheth, on teaching; 8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness. 9 Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. 10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; 11 Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; 12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; 13 Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. 14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. 15 Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. 16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.*

The apostle Paul, among the first great pastors of the Church, invariably offered instruction that was a mixture of doctrine and the practical outworking of that doctrine. Had he merely offered doctrine alone, his listeners might well have advanced in head-knowledge, but have been at a loss as to how to apply it. We all know the trap that the acquisition of great learning brings, when it is independent of a means of putting it to work in the service of others.

The previous eleven chapters of this greatest of Paul's epistles had summarized his discussion of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and how it makes null and void any effort to justify oneself before God on the basis of works. *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law*, asserted the apostle (3:28). *Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (5:1)*, he reaffirmed. The grand climax occurs in chapter 8, where Paul unveils for his readers an entirely new law, based upon the life and freedom given by the impartation of the Holy Spirit. It is new because it is a source of actual empowerment to obey God that the old law could never provide.

After this passage are three chapters that are almost parenthetical, where Paul discusses the present and future state of Israel according to the flesh, his own kinsmen, assuring his readers that even though the old law has been superseded, God's promises to Israel, made hundreds of years ago, will in their time be fulfilled.

Following all of this hardcore doctrine comes today's passage, and you will notice that the tone has been altered entirely. Now that we know so . . . , so much, we are obligated to not

merely add it to some already over-stuffed mental library of theological knowledge which will probably only be a source of pride. No, we must put it to work at the grass roots level, and especially, within the situation of the church. Our Epistle needs to be read within its context, which includes these verses that come just before it (read vv. 1-5, above). Maybe I could boil it down to this short maxim: “The more we know, the more we serve.” The great apostolic teacher always sends his students forth from class, after they have been lifted to the sublimest of heights of Christian doctrine, with a very earthy mission. It is to find their God-given place in the church, to screw themselves into it like lightbulbs into their appointed sockets, and to function there at fullest brightness, without complaint.

Notice the variety of activities to which we are appointed *according to the grace that is given to us*: prophesying, ministering (or serving), teaching, exhorting, giving, ruling, showing mercy. None of us is left out of a list that is so broad. Notice as well the many attitudes with which these functions are to be performed: with *faith*, with *simplicity*, *diligence*, and *cheerfulness*. On the one hand, there is no place for half-heartedness. But on the other, mere sweat and toil will not do, but only yielding to the same *grace* that underlies each and every function. If it’s simply a matter of who works the hardest, pride immediately strides in and lays claim to itself for its accomplishments. To summarize, there is no place in this scenario for underachievers who will not appropriate God’s grace on behalf of the church, nor for overachievers who go beyond the place to which they were appointed.

Do you sense the tone of humility that underlies today’s entire Epistle? How different this is from the corporate structures through which the world conducts its business! *In honour preferring one another...*, in other words, treating each other as if they were at the top, the very top, the Chief Executive Officer. *Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.* This is a most remarkable verse, and one which it would do us well to keep before our eyes constantly, in a world that makes so much out of beauty, success, status, and achievement. If I am to *be of the same mind toward you*, there is no room for an attitude of superiority, regardless of how much I’ve done, or achieved, or suffered, or know. Think of it for a minute: this good counsel is coming from that servant of God, St. Paul, who seemed to know more of the heights and depths of walking with Christ than many of his peers. He knew the gamut of persecutions, and he knew the experience of exalted visions. *Condescend* in this context carries absolutely none of the inferences we draw from it today. Yes, lower yourself, lower yourself to the same level of *men of low estate*, that is, men without honor, without position,

without recognition, without attention. Good company, you say? But Paul says it is the best of company.

All the world is aglow *minding high things*, and to get up to such a place is like climbing a greased, treacherous ladder, where one misstep spells a long, long fall to certain disaster. And still, onward and upward they go, urged on my empty promises, by tales of men and women who have sold their souls for empty destinies, by those whose lives and hearts are devoid of virtue, who are in reality present the worst possible cultural examples, rather than the most healthful, safe, and reliable.

The church is a place where the shoeshine boy is exalted above the Wall Street magnate sitting above him, who controls the ebb and flow of world markets with the click of a mouse. It is a place where the gold star and the framed diploma are given to the lowly and faithful heart whose works were performed in quiet humility. It is a place where rewards are given to those who hoped humbly that others would receive them instead.

Recall those two verses I read which just precede today's text: *For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another.* Within the hallowed walls of the church, there is a great leveling, and it is our joy and our salvation. No one is any better. None more important. None of less value. Each makes the most of the other, and the least of themselves. The race is to the lowest, not the highest, position. What a remarkable example this presents!

Absent from such an environment is the stress of competitiveness. Envy, that most destructive of attitudes, also has no place, because if I am exactly where I am supposed to be, and learning to love it, why should I be concerned if you are in exactly the same place, yourself? And since we are all operating *according to the grace given us*, there is no room for taking to ourselves undue credit.

I would close with one more thought. Men can accomplish many things by themselves. It is well within their power to build cities, create empires, invent new technologies, and create high art. But the work of the church, which is the salvation of souls, is beyond the skill of any of us. There isn't one tool we possess that will serve to propel one person one inch closer to heaven. This is a supernatural task to which you and I are invited as active participants with God. Without His grace guiding our hands, filling our hearts and minds, appointing us to our individual roles, we would stumble blindly in this which is the highest of all human callings.

To repeat Paul's words, from the same chapter as our Epistle, which are a familiar part of the Canon of the Mass that we pray every week at Holy Communion: *I beseech you therefore,*

*brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*