

Grounded in Discipleship
September 21, 2008
Romans 12:1-21

I know our tradition here is for me to read the Scriptures now and for us to stand up in honor of God's Word. But for this passage, which is Romans 12, go ahead and open your Bibles. You do bring your Bibles to worship, right? If not, there is one there in the pew for you. I am always amazed when I meet people in the hall and they say, "I'm going to Bible Study," and they won't have their Bibles. (It causes a little suspicion there.)

I have always told you that I read stuff backward. If I get a new novel I read the last paragraph first. If I get a new book I will read the last couple of pages—sometimes even the whole last chapter. I want to know how it is going to end. It bothers me if I don't know the end. The "staying on the edge of your seat" is overrated for me, so I want to know how a story is going to end.

Now there are some interesting things that happen when you start reading Romans 12 backward. Have you ever gotten a new gadget and you take it home, rip it out of the box, plug it in and it doesn't work? As a last resort you read the instruction

manual and then you call the company. You stay on hold for several hours and finally get somebody who is going to talk you through this, and what do they do? They begin a troubleshooting process to walk you through all the things you should have done and all the things that should have happened to make sure what you do will enable the gadget to work.

So here's my question, and it comes out of Romans 12. If we, as the light of the world, are supposed to be shining and pushing back the darkness, why aren't we? If we have this divine connection to Jesus Christ, why isn't there more evidence? Verse 21: *Do not overcome evil with evil; but overcome evil with good.* Do you do that? Is the place you work more like Christ because you are there? Is the place where you go to school more sanctified because you are there? Now I understand (I grew up Baptist) that we were told to withdraw from the world lest somehow the world would have a bad influence on us. We were told to pick our friends very carefully, because "if you lie down with dogs you get fleas." You heard all those things, right? We were not to hang around with people like that because "bad company corrupts good character." We pick our friends carefully. I understand all of that. But what has happened is we Baptists have pulled back to a Gospel Ghetto. It is not unusual for us to go through an entire week and never meet someone who is not part of our church family, or who is unconnected from

Jesus Christ. Understand, Jesus puts you in places and relationships with other people—especially those people who are unconnected—so that you can be part of the process to reclaim that person’s life or to redeem that area of the world. You say, “Mike, the world has such a powerful influence.” We are to influence the world. We are to push the darkness back. No matter how dark the room, if you turn on a light the darkness goes away. It doesn’t have to be a very big light bulb. It doesn’t have to be a very powerful current. The smallest match will push the darkness back. Why is it that more times than not, Christians are corrupted and taken off task by the world rather than Christians changing the way something is done in our world? We don’t overcome evil with good. There’s not enough of Jesus in us to push back the darkness of the world.

How are you doing with vengeance? This section, verses 19-21, says, ¹⁹ ***Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for His wrath. For it is written: Vengeance belongs to Me; I will repay, says the Lord.*** ²⁰ ***But if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.*** ²¹ ***Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.*** How do you do with vengeance? Me? I don’t do well at all. You see, as I’m writing “vengeance,” in my mind I’m thinking “justice.” Right? I mean, if somebody does me wrong, or if somebody hurts me or attacks

me, I want to make sure I get them back in spades. Now some of my friends accuse me of hunting rabbits with Howitzers. It's effective. It doesn't leave a lot of the rabbit, but it works. Now you're saying, "Mike, I'm like that, you're like that." Yeah, but do you know what the problem is? Jesus is not like that. Jesus walked this walk. He was betrayed by his friends and didn't retaliate. He was falsely accused by His enemies and didn't retaliate. He was put on trial, wrongly condemned and did not retaliate. He suffered a shameful death on the cross and did not retaliate. He trusted God the Father with His reputation. Do you do that? I know, you are kind of squirming, saying, "Mike, that doesn't work. That just will not work. This is our world. Our world is a jungle and it is 'dog eat dog,' and you better grab what is yours." The Bible does not teach that we grab what is ours. The Bible teaches it is His for us to receive.

Do we live this way? Do you trust Jesus when things have been unjustly done to you? "That won't work, Mike. Not in our world." Then you're not paying attention. Paul reminds us in the second chapter of Philippians that it did work. He says, ⁵*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

⁶*Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸And being found in appearance as a*

man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross!

⁹*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name,* ¹⁰*that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth,* ¹¹*and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* That's in Philippians 2:5-11. Tell me it didn't work.

How do you get along with other people in the community? That's Romans 12:14-16. ¹⁴*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.* ¹⁵*Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.* ¹⁶*Be in agreement with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation.* How do you get along with the community—those people outside of the church body? Do you live in peace? Are you the oil on the water, so that when there is a disagreement among friends or something is going on in your neighborhood, when a rumor starts in the office—are you the one that calms it down? Can you help someone deal with anger or a grudge? Do people who do not believe in Jesus still like having you around because of the peace you bring to the community? What about the body? Verses 9 and 10 say, ⁹*Love must be without hypocrisy. Detest evil; cling to what is good.* ¹⁰*Show family affection to one*

another with brotherly love. Outdo one another in showing honor. How do you do when you're "hanging with the body?"

One of the first ways you are able to tell if the vertical relationship with Jesus Christ is out of whack is that it shows up horizontally. It shows up when you're not getting along with your spouse. It shows up when you're not getting along with other children of God. It shows itself and all of a sudden you don't want to come to church, because it's full of hypocrites. So how are you doing in the body?

Verse 3 talks about gifts. Are you using your gifts? Are you engaged someplace? God has given you certain talents, resources and abilities. Are you using those talents, resources and abilities for the building of the church and for the building and extending of the kingdom of God? "I don't know my gift," you say. Then you need some time in prayer finding it. If you know your gift, then you should be using it. Sometimes the gifts aren't traditional. Sometimes there are ministries outside the church. Sometimes there are other ways to do this. Sometimes it's working in pre-school or sometimes it's teaching students, or teaching a young adult or senior adult class. You know your gifts; you know your passion; you know where you're supposed to be. The question is, "Are you there? Are you doing it?"

Have you noticed the progression? The progression of discipleship starts with using your gifts, then it is about getting along in the body, then it is about getting along out in the community. One of the hardest things to do, and one of the last things you are able to do in your disciple walk, is to deal with anger and revenge. The hardest thing of all is to engage against evil in our culture and our society, and push it back. Are you doing that? Jesus told His followers, “You will do exactly what I’ve done, and you will do even more if you are faithful and if you walk after Me.” Jesus would be calming the storm, feeding the 5,000, healing the sick, curing the blind, raising the dead, teaching the lame to dance. Jesus did some pretty good things that you rarely ever see happen in the body of the local church. Maybe we need to do some troubleshooting.

Maybe it’s because (in verse 2) you need to be renewing your mind. ***Be transformed.*** Remember the relationship is ongoing and transforming. ***Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*** Some of us came, joined the church, got baptized and are still thinking with the very same mind. The mind hasn’t been changed. The mind hasn’t grown. The mind hasn’t learned new skills. The mind hasn’t been developed or exercised.

“How do you do that?” you ask. You do that in a small group. You do that in a Bible study. You do that in a Sunday school class. You do that by opening your Bible and engaging in an intense discussion with other believers. You can do it on your own, but you can only go so far, because the first person you lie to is yourself. You are the first person who says, “This doesn’t belong to me. I don’t need to deal with it.” And if you don’t have a brother or sister around, saying “Yes you do!” then you’re doing just what Thomas Jefferson did. We always get mad at Jefferson because he had a New Testament in which he cut out everything he didn’t believe. You and I do the same thing. We just use a highlighter. This accountability happens in a small group. That is why you need to grab that card in your information today and go out to the Discipling Center in the Atrium to find a small group or an Adult Bible Study class for you to be involved in. You have to learn to think a different way. You have to learn to “think the kingdom of God.” You have to learn to “live the kingdom of God” because the living comes from your thinking.

Verse 1 talks about offering your body as a living sacrifice. You know, the one thing about a sacrifice is that you don’t expect to get it back. A sacrifice is offered and it’s gone. Did you notice how Paul talks about the totality of the Christian life—it’s body and mind—the total person that is under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Discipleship is not about getting smarter. It’s not about learning the

answers for Jeopardy. It's about aligning your life to the teachings of Jesus Christ. It's about following Jesus. It's about learning more about who He is, learning more about how He sees reality, learning more about what He tells us about the future. Then it's about changing our lifestyles, offering our bodies to align it so that we are following what Jesus teaches. "I am lining my life up with who Jesus is." That's discipleship—"I am becoming a little Christ," which is what the word Christian originally meant.

Several years ago when Michael Jordan was in the hey-day of his career, he sold \$200 tennis shoes. The tag line was, "You can be Mike." No, I can't. You know, there are some hard realities when you turn 50 and you have to let go of all those childhood dreams. There are some things I will never be able to do. You put on those \$200 tennis shoes, and you're just a fat white dude in the middle of the court with \$200 tennis shoes. "You mean I won't be able to take off from the foul line and sail into the air?" No, you'll never do that. "I won't be able to dribble between my legs and give the guy a fade back and dunk it?" No, you'll never do that. Maybe if you got on a ladder you could dunk it—you and your \$200 tennis shoes.

Now, if I can't be like Michael, what in the world makes me think I can be like Jesus? I'll tell you the key difference. When the world tells me to be like Michael they give me shoes to put on, and maybe a jersey to wear. They put something on the outside, and tell me I'm changed on the inside. No, that's not it. Jesus says, "You come and be like Me. I'll come live on the inside. I'll change the way you think. I will teach you. I will bring your body alive so that when you pray for someone, I'm praying for them through you. I'm touching them through you. The things you know you're not able to do, I will do through you." Not Me, but Christ in me. I can do *all* . . . what's the word here? Notice He didn't say *most*, He didn't say *important*. He said *I can do all things Christ who gives me strength*. This is this connection we keep talking about. It's ongoing, it's transforming and if that's not happening in your life, then maybe this is the moment you do a little trouble shooting. Walk from where you want to be, back up to where you thought you were and begin to check those kinds of moments and kinds of things. Am I obedient to the Lord's teaching as a steward? Or is my disobedience blocking His power in my life? Am I being obedient in my relationships? Or is my disobedience blocking His power in my life?

Have you made the original connection? See, you can try all you want to, and try hard and sincerely, but if Christ isn't in you, you can't do it. I know it is hard for

us to understand this. Sometimes it's hard to explain how Christ comes and lives inside of you, and changes what you say, and changes what you think, and changes what you desire, and changes how you live. But I'm one that was changed. I'm one who has been in situations where a circumstance presented itself and I did exactly what I didn't want to do "as Mike," but what I knew Christ was telling me to do. That inner strength didn't come from me. I'm not known for my great personal discipline. But I can tell you, there have been relationships that I've prayed for that have been changed. I can tell you, there are situations where I normally would have reacted in anger, and I was able to react with forgiveness and peace. That came from Jesus inside of me.