

“Is that even controversial?” Romans 12:9-21

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today for our meditations we have this fragment from the letter that Paul the apostle, guided by the Holy Spirit, wrote to Christian brothers and sisters in the great city of Rome. What Paul wrote gives us an opportunity to reflect on something that have not been received well in certain circles.

You may wonder, what is it? It is the question about Christian living. About following our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, about being His disciples. About what it means practically to be a Christian and to live as one.

What can be controversial about it? In this fragment alone the Holy Spirit gives us more than dozen instructions for our Christian lives. The Bible, the Old and the New Testament, is saturated with instructions, commands, demands, exhortations, directives, mandates for God’s people. Do that! Live this way!

Can you guess what could here be controversial? Yes, we don’t like to be told what to do. Especially these days... We want to do things the way we prefer. We want to make up our own minds and we want to make our own choices.

It is discussing our new lives in Christ, where we can see who actually has heard and understood the Gospel and who hasn’t; who knows what it means to be a Christian and who have no idea what this new life with Jesus is about.

You would have heard people saying that they have their own faith, or that they too believe that there is a god. Many such people would self-identify as Christians. But what they say betrays the sad reality that they have not heard the Gospel. What they are talking about is simply the knowledge of God that is written on our hearts. Everyone knows, or we could say – senses that there is something more beyond what

we can perceive with our physical senses. But they don't know who He is. And that is not the Christian faith, that is not the Gospel. Then there are those who claim that they know the Christian message. And it is – “we are sinners and Jesus forgives us all our sins.” They may even add that we are saved by God's grace alone, and no good works are required for God's salvation, and so – they jump to the conclusion – that we can do whatever we want.

It is these people who get upset when they are reminded that to be a Christian means to lead a new life shaped and guided by the Word of God. That Christian life doesn't end with knowing the statement that “we are sinners and Jesus saves us by grace alone”. That is where our Christian lives begin.

We are not saved to keep living our old lives, we are saved, we are redeemed to begin to lead renewed and inspired lives. We are not just saved *from*; we are saved *for*! For new, beautiful and meaningful lives with Jesus. For an illustration think about this – how much sense would it make to say that:

“I was enslaved, without hope, and someone freed me at a very great cost, and now I am free... and now I will go back to my old slavery... for I am free!” That sounds really stupid, but that is what our sinfulness does, it makes us foolish.

I don't know how controversial this seem to you, but during these years in Barossa I have had a few very heated conversations where self-identified Christians tried to passionately argue that they shouldn't be expected to do anything... and even the invitation to receive the precious gifts on our God in the fellowship of His saints, even that was perceived as something offensive.

Similarly, this issue of our new life in Christ is controversial in those churches, which have replaced the Biblical Gospel of repentance and forgiveness and new life in Christ with that other gospel – of inclusivity and happy old lives enjoying our beloved sins. They would scream from the bottom of their lungs, that the Gospel has freed them from the Law, that we are free to be and do whatever our hearts desire.

Now, the moment of truth – what about you? Do you want the Word of God to instruct you and guide you, to exhort you and direct you in this new life with Christ? If that seems daunting and unpleasant that the Word of God would teach you how to live, then you have a problem. It is a big problem.

It means that you haven't actually heard and understood the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ. Or at least it means that at the moment you are more influenced by the old sinful flesh than by the Spirit of God.

We need to remember this! We all are born dead in our sins. Ugly and repulsive to the very core of our hearts, rebellious and arrogant towards our Creator, foolish and deserving to be abandoned and deprived of God's goodness and mercy. That's how

we come into this world. That's who we are on our own. Even the best among us. We may not see it clearly, but the Holy God who sees our hearts, He knows it. And for the sake of such ungrateful and stubborn creatures, the eternal Son left behind the divine glory. To rescue us from the destruction that we deserve and to bring us into the wonderful fellowship with the Triune God that we don't deserve.

He became one of us, humbled Himself to the death on the cross, and exchanged His life to yours, so that on the Last Day we wouldn't be held accountable for our ugly sins, but would be graciously welcomed into the very presence of the Holy God.

When the Holy Spirit enables us to see our real situation as seen with the eyes of our Creator, when it sinks in what we deserve and what Jesus has done for us, we are filled with gratitude towards the One, who has sacrificed Himself for us, unworthy.

If we understand this, if we truly understand this, it is unimaginable that we would still say: "Good, now we can do whatever we want. We can continue our old sinful self-centred lives." If the Holy Spirit has created in you a new heart, such attitude is literary impossible. Instead...

"How, Jesus, how can I thank You? How can I please you? What would You like me to do? I belong to You. I am Yours. Just say a word..." That's what our new hearts shout out, ready to serve and obey the One, who has been so gracious to us.

Just remember someone whom you have loved with your whole hearts? What were you thinking? "How can I please them, how can I bring them more joy? How can I make them happy? What is it that they would really appreciate?"

We may feel bad if we can't do anything for them. We may feel desperate if we don't know what they like and how to bring them joy. And how good, how fulfilling it is to know that "yes, this is what they love, this is how I can pleasantly surprise them." If we have heard the Gospel not just with our ears, but also with our hearts and minds, then this is how we look at God our Father and Jesus, our Lord.

Then we are all ears whenever we can find out what pleases Him, and how we can show our gratitude. "Tell me, tell me!" That is what Paul does. We don't have enough time to reflect on every wise instruction that He gives, and most are quite self-explanatory, just a few quick comments.

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection." Genuine love is not a vague feeling that makes us feel good, it is grounded in the truth, when you know what is good and pleasing to God and when you abhor and stand against what is evil. It is not some emotional people pleasing attitude, it is self-sacrificial service to others, that seeks their good.

“Outdo one another in showing honour.” It means to see and treat others as God sees them, as infinitely precious, created in His Image and likeness, redeemed and destined for eternal glory. Even if your eyes don’t see it, let your attitude show it.

“Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.” The world loves to associate with the mighty and powerful, so they can feel better about themselves and perhaps gain some goodies. We already are associated and even intimately united with the God Most-High, now we are sent to lift up those whom the world has cast away.

“Live in harmony with one another. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Be peacemakers, bring reconciliation, harmony and joy in all relationship, if possible. But remember that there are limits. We cannot have peace with those who force us to deny Christ and to listen men more than God.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them [...] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God [...] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

This is so much against the natural grain of our old hearts. But the Holy Spirit has given us new hearts, much, much bigger and much more gracious hearts, expanded and filled by the joyful hope of what awaits all God’s chosen saints.

Therefore, we respond to trials and attacks as people, who know the big picture; we know who is in charge, we know the justice will be served. Thus, we pray and hope that even those, who now act as our enemies, one day, by God’s grace, and maybe thanks to our surprising Christian attitudes would become our beloved brothers and sisters. That would be our sweet Christian “revenge”.

These are just a few things that the Holy Spirit instructs us to do. There is so much more. Concluding I just want to remind you something – when transformed by the Gospel you strive to lead this new Christian life, every time when you think how to please your God, your thoughts return to the One, to whom we owe everything.

Your grateful response brings you back to Jesus and reminds you of what He has done for you – He found you, He rescued you, when you were proudly heading into eternal destruction, He gave you this new life, He Himself keeps you on this path, and at the end, He Himself, Your Lord and Brother, will meet you, will give you a new, resurrected body like His, and will show the place that He has prepared for you.

This is so good... May your new life in Christ doesn’t seem controversial to you. May it bring much glory to our God, many blessings to your neighbours, and great, great joy to you and your loved ones.

Amen.