

**14th March 2004: Rev Pressley Sutherland**  
**Theme: What is Good and Acceptable and Perfect?**

Romans 12 is a chapter from Paul's letter to the somewhat divided church in Rome. In it, there is continual struggle between Jewish Christians who are observant of the written Law of Hebrew scriptures and Gentiles who do not share these customs and do not feel the need to do so in order to be Christian. Chapter 12 is concerned with shifting the focus toward the life of true Christians with regard to character and spiritual gifts, rather than whether one is Gentile or Jew.

Earlier in Romans 7.7-25, Paul struggles with what I identify in large part as the problem with fundamentalism. By this, I mean fundamentalism in the sense that we rely on written law and our limited understanding in order to be justified by our works to God. But Paul has found that the nature of his humanity, when relying solely on himself and his understanding of the Law, is to do the very thing that the Law was written to teach us not to do. Equally, Paul finds that he does not do that which he knows he ought to do, try as he might. In this lies the dilemma of being a human trying to find the heart of God. So often the zeal of religious people brings suffering and pain rather than the grace and renewed life that is God's desire for us as revealed through Christ's resurrection.

As a fundamentalist lawyer, Paul prosecuted and persecuted Christians in his zeal to purge them from the Promised Land of Israel. But he ended up doing the very thing that Mosaic law would teach us not to do, "Thou shall not murder." Technically, as a fundamentalist relying on written law and his mind to interpret this, he was doing what was right--prosecuting those who believed differently within the land through a sense of righteous entitlement and the right to possess what was theirs in God's name, as in the days of Joshua. Furthermore, he would have been supported and encouraged for doing good and holy work by others operating from a fundamentalist mindset.

He writes with anguish upon realising what he had been doing to other people was so profoundly wrong according to the Living Word revealed through Christ. 'Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!' (Romans 7.24-25). Through his powerful encounter with Christ, his eyes were not only opened to see what he had done wrong, he was personally transformed forever through the grace and love of Christ for him regardless of what he had done in the past. One can almost hear the strains of 'Amazing Grace' behind this story.

What does this have to do with chapter 12 and us, you might ask? Paul offers us sound advice from one who has been there and back. He says in effect that as people of faith we must worshipfully place ourselves entirely in God's hands, all that we are, through faith in God's understanding leading to our own. God's Spirit will reveal what is good, acceptable and perfect for the situation we are in at the time. This is not a matter of some bodily possession where we give up our mental reasoning, rather it is a choice of faith to listen first to the Holy Spirit flowing from and through our hearts in all things. According to Paul, we must exercise our ministry gifts with a sense of always being willing to change when we get off-track. The marks of Christ will be our witness when we are living our faith properly--for genuine love is the most important quality of a true Christian, not fundamentalism.

Is this lesson meant to make us have a bleak outlook on our limited understanding? Heavens no! We all make mistakes, and will continue to do so. We all do wonderful things too, and will continue to do so. It is to teach us to have faith that we don't always need to be right and have it all figured out for ourselves and everybody else in the world nor do we need to pretend to as people of faith. On the one hand, it is a call to humility for Christians--to be aware that we each have only a portion of wisdom, and to let God be God. On the other, it is a wonderful promise that the Holy Spirit is always there for us to comfort, guide, heal, teach and extend us beyond our limitations if we open to her inner presence with thanksgiving through faith. Only then can we overcome our tendency to fundamentalism (whether liberal, conservative, charismatic or whatever) and start learning the truth about this wonderful Way of Christ and the Spirit that reveals Words of life and grace for all of us.

If you will permit me a closing computer analogy... Not asking to be filled with the Holy Spirit is like being a computer that has a modem but doesn't know it can connect with the Internet. Through simple faith (it doesn't have to be a big, splashy emotional experience), you can access this well of Spiritual provision. Just prayerfully ask to be filled with God's Spirit, listen and respond with praise, and relax and enjoy how God will make what is good and acceptable and perfect happen in your life and the lives of those you to whom you are sent.

Please take some time each day this week and season of Lent to sincerely invite the Holy Spirit to lead you in all things. Turn and joyfully, worshipfully offer all that you are for her to do good works through you. Be willing to change and be corrected should this prove necessary, and trust by faith that you already have what you need--persevere in prayer. This was Christ's promise to all who call on his name. In this way, Christ will be revealed, moving powerfully through all areas of your life and relationships bringing wiser love and needed blessings.

'Let love be genuine; resist what is destructive, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; out do one another in showing honour.' Romans 12.9

Yours In Christ,

Pressley