



Sermon

Taking our Spiritual Temperature

Romans 12:9-21; Matthew 16:21-28

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Peter just didn't get what Jesus had been trying to tell the disciples, and tried to steer Jesus away from the cross. Not without reason, because this evil form of torture and death was perfected by the Romans over 500 years, to be a deterrent to those defying Rome and the law. But God's way of dealing with evil trumps even the worst that humans can dream up. Let's fast-forward a few years.

Just as the early church was starting to get going in Damascus, a citizen named Ananias had a vision from the Lord. He may not have been too surprised at this, because Peter had prophesied on the day of Pentecost, that on that very day, they were experiencing the fulfilment of the prophet Joel's words:

"In the last days, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy; your young men will see visions."

In the vision, Ananias was told to go to a certain street in his home town and there he would find a man who was blind. He was then expected to pray for the man, who would then be able to see again.

But there was one problem in this instruction from God. The blind man was a powerful Jewish terrorist named Saul, who was mandated by the authorities to wipe out the emerging church Ananias was involved in. If you were in Ananias' shoes, how would *you* have reacted?

Ananias, not surprisingly, objected. For all he knew, when he came to call, Saul might have had a few of his murderous buddies hiding behind the door just waiting to pounce on him.

Ananias displayed absolutely amazing courage, obedience and love for the Lord. As far as we know, he wasn't given any assurance that he would come out of this encounter alive – it was just, "Go." But one fact we know from the account in Acts 9, is that the Lord told Ananias, "This man Saul is My chosen instrument to carry My name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name."

Thanks to Ananias' courage and obedience to the Lord, Saul was healed, converted and baptised, being given the Christian name of Paul. And now today, we can read Paul's letter to the Romans, which is his detailed explanation of the good news of the Kingdom of God and its practical implications for the lives of Christians. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Ananias went to the house Paul was in, facing the possibility of imprisonment and death but these possible evils were overcome, simply by his obedience.

We can all, just like Gideon, think of reasons why God should not use us to overcome evil. “I’m too young.” “I’m too busy.” I’m only a new Christian.” “I’m too old to have any influence.” But we all have a sphere of influence, a group of people to whom we relate; a group of people for whom we pray. We can all, like Ananias, listen to the Lord and obey him.

If we have eyes to see, evil is around us in our world. Let’s take a look at the evils mentioned in Romans 12. Open it with me if you will... injustice, insincerity, hatred, dishonour, persecution, pride, and retaliation. They are all around us. We need to recognise it in our own backyards and respond appropriately, but using the strength that is given us by the Holy Spirit, not trying to root it out by ourselves.

Facing down evil by sheer force of will is hard work and sometimes we are weaker than that evil. Strengthening oneself in the Lord is a whole different sermon topic, but one way to do it, for those who have the gift, is to spend even 5 minutes a day speaking aloud to God in tongues. I suddenly realised the other day that that habit is probably what has transformed me from a timid, retiring person into a confident person. Use the gift, if you have it. On the day of Pentecost, the fearful disciples were suddenly bold after the Holy Spirit came upon them and they began speaking in other languages supernaturally.

For those who have other gifts, singing praise songs or speaking out psalms of praise also trains us to look to God’s ability rather than bemoan our own inabilities. That sort of praise-focus helps us to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer, and fuels our spiritual fervour.

“But, but,” I hear your say... “I’ve tried and it wore off.” Well, maybe we also need to look at removing things that hinder us.

Firstly, habitual sin that we excuse ourselves for is a significant hindrance. It weakens us spiritually and gives the devil a foothold in our lives. It is vital to be transformed by the renewing of our minds – stop believing lies like “I can get away with it – just one more time...”

Confession to a trusted elder can help, along with accountability.

Another example is something that comes up time and time again as we listen to peoples’ struggles. It is the need to forgive someone. Sometimes we can come across a person whose mouth seem to be like the recorded messages in a complaints department. Listen to them and all you get is gripes.

God commands us to forgive. He knows that if we insist on holding unforgiveness in our hearts, it is like drinking poison and hoping the other person will die. It’s like carrying a heavy stone everywhere we go – it makes everything harder than it needs to be. Be assured that letting the matter go into Jesus’ hands **doesn’t** mean the other person gets off scot-free, the evildoer **will** ultimately answer to God for what they did.

Now I trained as a nurse. When I was training, I had to become more acutely aware of the reality of unseen things – not supernatural ones, but bacteria and viruses! It is hard to convince oneself that such unseen things are real and have any power to harm us, but by studying and learning, I made the transition into relating to this unseen world of microbes making things safe for myself and others.

Unforgiveness is also unseen, but it informs our thoughts and influences our actions. You can’t follow the instructions here in Romans 12 while you hold onto grudges. Refusing to forgive is like putting up a roadblock that stops vital aid coming to a famine-struck area.

If you have a reaction to a situation that is out of proportion, this may indicate that there is a need to forgive. Ask God to help you identify the cause. Listen to your heart. Is there anyone you are still angry at? Write down that name and situation. Getting it outside of your mind helps. Then ask Jesus to help you get rid of the effect of that situation. He will give you grace to choose to forgive.

Letting the situation go into his hands, means **you** don’t carry the burden into the future. Then make another choice. Bless those who have done the wrong. (See v14 and 20) You can bless the person at

a distance. The very least is to bless them, saying, “May they come to know Jesus’ love and be born again.” If God gives you the grace, you can choose to supply the person’s need (v20) “If your enemy is hungry, feed him.”

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

It’s awful to see someone totally lacking in spiritual zeal who hasn’t taken their spiritual temperature in years. Romans 12 is a great thermometer. Don’t ask yourself, “What boxes do I need to tick here?” It’s not a list of duties to achieve, but instruction on how to direct the grace that has been given to us. “How does this passage make me think and feel? Does any part of it make me ashamed? Do I feel complaisant or at peace? Is God pointing out something I need to change in my attitude?”

Using these questions is something you can do to kick-start a conversation with God. If Level 3 is less stressful than Level 2 for you, grab the opportunity today! Take some time from daily duties or technology time and read Romans 12 again. Ask God to highlight things he wants to talk about. He may want to say, “Well done!” or he may say, “This needs attention.”

Don’t be tempted to go down the track of condemnation, listening to the devil tell you what a failure you are. That’s a voice to boot out – just say, “Go talk to Jesus about that! He’s already paid for my forgiveness.” Focus on the fact that Jesus is the one who enables us to do the good things described. After all, as Paul says in Philippians 2:13

“It is God who works in you to will and to act, in order to fulfil his good purpose.”

It’s his work and we cooperate with him. Just as parents love to see our children grow up physically and mature in attitude, God loves to see us become mature, able to face the challenge of swimming against the current of this world’s opinion.

In Romans 11, Paul states that **God does not owe us anything** and He is **complete in knowledge and understanding**. He is the most perfect, most impartial judge. But he has decided to shower us with mercy and love.

Therefore, Paul goes on, in view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies to God. Don’t be squeezed into thinking the way the world thinks, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Paul is telling us that what we do with our bodies matters, and the way we use our bodies comes from how we think and believe. When we belong to Jesus, we can’t just continue in the same pattern of thinking and behaviour that we had before we knew Him.

He is calling us to maturity and preparing us for purposes far higher and more important than we can comprehend right now. To find out the practical details, let’s look again at Romans 12:9-21.

“Love must be sincere.” Hold on, can’t I just get away with a smile and a quick wave after the service on Sundays? Can’t I just keep God happy by paying my tithe and turning up when I’m rostered on at church?

“Be devoted to one another in brotherly love.” Isn’t this a bit extreme? Devoted is a strong word.

“Honour one another above yourselves” – you mean, even HIM? Or HER??

“Be patient in affliction. Bless those who persecute you.” Help! Is this what I signed up for? I’m sure I didn’t read that in the Alpha manual!

And to sum it up: **“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”**

These things are all significantly counter-intuitive and counter-cultural. They are also REALLY hard to do just by toughing it out in our own strength. If anyone feels they could do that whole list, they have never been on the receiving end of something really nasty. They’ve never been so angry they’ve said, “I’ll make him pay for that!”

If we look over that whole list, maybe we could attempt a few, but the whole lot? It's beyond *MY* ability! The whole of chapter 12 sets an incredibly high moral standard.

Contrasting with the standards of the world, which sink lower and lower all the time, the Word of God displays His standard - firm, steady and knowable. That's why earlier in the chapter Paul says, "Don't be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Sometimes this happens quickly, when we are born again. Sometimes it is more of a process. The more we comprehend and experience His love, the more we want to please God.

But taking this passage in isolation might lead to the question, "Is that all Christianity is about? Is it just about being good? Is it just about trying really hard and getting a pat on the back at the end?" Of course not. Romans 12:2 – "Be transformed by the renewing of your mind". You can't be transformed by trying really, really hard to be good. We need outside help for an inside job.

Somewhere there is a proverb that says, "A man is known by the company he keeps." Whomever you hang out with influences you subtly and overtly. As we spend time in prayer and the Word in God's presence, we will be changed, transformed by the presence of the Holy Spirit. More and more, we will want what He wants and view things the way He views them. We will hear His voice and that changes us inside.

This list in verses 9-21 hangs on "Be transformed" back in v2. This is growing up from being an infant, to being someone who has the moral fibre to be joyful in hope, patient in affliction etc. But it is more than just moral fibre. Think of Jesus' attitude – for the hope set before him, he endured the cross.

Romans 12 is about growing in righteousness. That's a big word, which encompasses right relationships, not just ticking all the boxes of "do"s and "don't"s. It means rightly relating to others, to God and even to yourself. Each of those relationships affects the others.

Remember Ananias. He struggled with what he was told to do, but he acted out of love and trust in God. What an amazing blessing came to the church and the whole world, through hard-edged Saul being transformed into Saint Paul. Ananias could never have imagined what would come from his courageous obedience. Let's offer ourselves, body, soul and spirit, to our amazing, miracle-working God, allowing Him to transform us by the renewing of our minds, aligning us with his ways and purposes and he will achieve things so good that we could never have dreamed of them.