

Sunday 15 November 2020

Encourage One Another

Romans 12:10 Honour one another

Lord of all,

help us to come to you now not just as an outward gesture,
but in heart and mind and soul.

Help us to make space in our hectic lives
to be still in your presence,
and so may we live in you and you in us.

Accept us now as we come to you,
and use us for your kingdom.

As I come into God's presence, I choose to praise him in the words of Psalm 77:11-15

¹¹ I will call to mind the deeds of the LORD;
I will remember your wonders of old.

¹² I will meditate on all your work,
and muse on your mighty deeds.

¹³ Your way, O God, is holy.
What god is so great as our God?

¹⁴ You are the God who works wonders;
you have displayed your might among the peoples.

¹⁵ With your strong arm you redeemed your people,
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

We often think of Paul's letter to the church in Rome as his most theological, as indeed it is. But that is not the total of this letter's content. From the beginning of chapter 12 to the end of the letter Paul turns to practical matters. As is always the case with Paul, belief affects behaviour. If what Paul claims in chapters 1 to 11 is true, there will be consequences in believer's lives. "If these things are so," Paul says, "then present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." (Romans 12:1) Much of the rest of the letter is instructions and examples of how Jesus' followers are to do this and so "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [their] minds, so that [they] may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect". (2) So, in Romans 12:9-13 we read:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

This is one of several lists in which Paul suggests ways Christians are to behave. These lists are almost always concerned with building up the community of believers, not simply with the pursuit of individual virtue or holiness for its own sake.

As is often the case, love stands at the head of the list. This love is not just a feeling that Christians have for one another. It shows itself in practical care for each other, so revealing itself to be the real thing rather than a counterfeit. The list begins with the most general of moral commands, to hate what is evil and to hold fast to what is good. Paul assumes here that his readers know the difference between good and evil without the need to go into detail. But love is more than a moral or ethical checklist, so he expands his list.

He begins with some general thoughts and then focuses in on some examples of genuine love. There must be real affection between believers. This will be evident as Christians show honour to one another, in other words, as they look up to one another, not down. There are echoes of Philippians 2:1-4 here. They should be eager in their pursuit of this lifestyle, enthusiastically seeking it, regarding themselves as servants of the Lord, that is, of Jesus himself. Their life should be a steady stream of rejoicing in hope, remaining patient under suffering, and giving themselves to prayer. And they should share with Christians in need and be eager to open their hearts and homes to others.

I ask myself if it is easier to find opportunities to live out this distinct lifestyle in our current, strange times, or more difficult – or simply different. We pause and pray as we ask God to show us ways to honour one another, and so let the light of Jesus shine around us.

Pause and pray

This path has always been the way for God's people. As the prophets spoke of old:

- ⁶ Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of injustice,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
- ⁷ Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover them,
and not to hide yourself from your own kin?
- ⁸ Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,
and your healing shall spring up quickly;
your vindicator shall go before you,
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.
- ⁹ Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

Isaiah 58:6–9a

Gracious God,
take our faith, flawed though it is,
our love, poor though it may be,
and our commitment, for all its imperfections,
and use us in your service
to make known your gracious purpose,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.