

One body in Christ - Romans 12:1-8

Sunday, 7th September 2014

Let me ask you a question? What's the fittest you've ever been? For me it was back in the last century - April 1995 when aged 36 and I was about to run the London Marathon. I was fittest I'd ever been and was proud to record a time of 4 hours and 44 minutes. Why was I so fit then compared to what I am now? Well I'm nearly 20 years older and these days I play a bit of 5-a-side football and the occasional short run. 20 years ago I was playing 11-a-side football, swimming regularly and going out for some very long runs! In short the main reason I was fit then was down to a training regime involving dedication, commitment and sacrifice!

So what's this got to do with our reading? One of the things our reading today urges - is to get and remain fit "spiritually" both individually and collectively as one body in Christ. So let's delve into this passage to find some encouragement in helping us as one body in Christ to keep developing our spiritual fitness. To help us I've chosen three things to highlight.

1. Godly mercy
2. Godly transformation
3. Godly body

As usual please have your Bible's open at the text as I'll be referring to various verses as we go along.

1. Godly Mercy

The very first word in our reading this morning is "Therefore" – so it's important we start by looking at what came before this passage. At the end of chapter 11:33-36 Paul offers a prayer of praise to God for the wisdom of God's plan. It highlights how God's methods and means are beyond our comprehension and that He governs the universe and our lives in perfect wisdom, justice, and love. And no one has been his counsellor. And therefore God owes nothing to any one of us. God alone is the possessor of absolute power and wisdom. So we are absolutely dependant on God. He is the source of all things, including ourselves. He is the power sustaining and ruling the world we live in. And God works out all things to bring glory to Himself. The all-powerful God deserves our praise. So it's no wonder Paul says in V1: "**Therefore**, I urge you, brothers, in view of **God's mercy**, to offer **your bodies as living sacrifices**, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Here is this all powerful God who owes nothing to anyone of us and all of us are ultimately absolutely dependant on Him. And yet He shows us mercy. The word "mercy" means "steadfast love". It refers to God's faithfulness. He has promised to be present always to care for His children. And yet this is despite the fact we all rebel against God and mess up.

Even if I only said, thought and did just one wrong thing every day I already would have committed over 60,000 sins that have been forgiven. Because of what God has done for us in Jesus our salvation is secure. Because of His mercy, His steadfast love you only need to accept Him to ensure you live eternally in God's presence. We are all outrageous sinners and yet we are saved by even more outrageous grace. It's overwhelming - think about it - our salvation depends not on our human efforts, not because of any righteous thing we've done but firmly and squarely on God's mercy. Salvation is a free gift from God - not something we earn, and not something we must pay back. A gift cannot be purchased by the recipient. The only right response to a loved one who offers a gift is graceful acceptance with gratitude. As we accept with thanksgiving the gift God has freely given to us and reflect on God's mercy (His steadfast love) there is no greater incentive to strive to live in accordance with His will. And so Paul urges us to 'offer our bodies as living sacrifices'. Because of God's mercy we have died to the power of sin and are no longer slaves to sin. As new Testament Christians we are under new management, new ownership and we are now free to offer ourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life.

Paul is saying – You are under grace now – so - live under grace. Remember we are embodied people not disembodied spirits. To offer our bodies is to offer everything that we are. As John Stott puts it: "Then our feet will walk in his paths, our lips will speak the truth and spread the gospel, our tongues will bring healing, our hands will lift up those who have fallen, and perform

many mundane tasks as well our arms will embrace the lonely and unloved, our ears will listen to the cries of the distressed and our eyes will look humbly and patiently towards God.” (Stott p322)

The Apostle Paul provide us with instructions for living as redeemed people in a fallen world challenging us on a daily basis to be living sacrifices laying aside our own desires and instead following Jesus putting all our energies and resources at his disposal and trusting him to guide us. And we do this in response to God’s mercy (His steadfast love), we do this out of gratitude that our sins have been forgiven.

Godly mercy - Outrageous sinners forgiven by an even more outrageous grace. In response we offer everything that we are to Jesus.

2. Godly transformation

Take a look at V2: **Do not conform** any longer to the pattern of this world, but **be transformed by the renewing of your mind**. Then you will be able to **test and approve what God's will is**—his good, pleasing and perfect will”. God has a plan for each one of us and the more we follow His Will for us the more we experience His transformation. As a loving Father He wants only what is best for us. He gave His Son to make our new lives possible and in response we are called to joyfully give ourselves as living sacrifices for his service. So how do we do that? How do we train to become spiritually fit running the race of life knowing that Jesus is there at the finishing line for us and that he has already won the gold medal on our behalf? Paul explains “Do not to conform any longer to the pattern of this world”, with its behaviour and customs that are usually selfish and often corrupting. Rather we are called to be distinctive and to stand up for Jesus. But sometimes it’s all too easy to blend in with the way the world is and live as if we’d never even heard of Jesus. And so Paul urges us to “be transformed by the renewing of your mind”.

It’s only when we allow the Holy Spirit to renew, re-educate, and redirect our minds that we start this process of transformation. We are called to love God with every inch of our being—This comes about by a combination of the Spirit and the Word of God. But let’s not kid ourselves this is easy. It is a spiritual discipline that involves us surrendering every aspect of our being to Christ - mind, body and soul – our whole lives. It is more active and demanding than rigorous physical exercise; and it is not necessarily automatic or easy. But take comfort - this is not just a purely human activity relying solely on one's own strength; it must also come about through a complete reliance on God's Word and Spirit.

Let me try and illustrate this. Who likes to be hugged? Normally when I give my wife Ruth a hug she hugs me back. But have you ever hugged somebody and they just stood there? You are involved in the action, but they are not. What I’m trying to say is you are both involved in the action and that you are willing. I love hugging Ruth but it feels odd on the occasions (usually when I’ve done something wrong) and she doesn’t hug me back. A true hug is when you are both participating in it.

Now think about Godly transformation. Yes – it is God who transforms us; but we have to be willing to play our part in this as well. Just as we have to make an effort to get physically fit or (hug the other person) so we also have to recognize the need to get and keep spiritually fit. For example – studying the bible, seeking to understand and reflect on the Word of God, prayer, worship, reading Christian books, Christian courses, serving others and lots more – and also meeting regularly together and encouraging each other, being one body in Christ - this is part of our training as we strive to become fit, transformed and renewed minds. And in doing so we open ourselves more and more to the working of the Holy Spirit who continues transforming our minds so we think and will with God’s heart and God’s mind, recognising, in the face of the pressure of the world to conform, that actually God’s way is the best and to really wanting to go that way.

As Paul’s words remind us - only a renewed mind can test and approve, in other words, discern, appreciate and determine to obey God’s will. John Stott puts it really well: Our mind is renewed by the Word and Spirit of God; then we are able to discern

and desire the will of God; and then we are increasingly transformed by it. Godly transformation. So let's move on to our third and final point...

3. Godly body

So our renewed mind is capable of discerning and approving God's will, but that same mind must also be active in evaluating ourselves, our identity and our gifts. We need to know who we are, and we need to have an accurate, balanced and sober self-image of ourselves. And being spiritually fit helps equip us for this. V3 says: "For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you".

Our self worth is our identity in Christ. Apart from him, we aren't capable of very much by eternal standards; however, in Jesus, we are valuable and capable of worthy service. If we fall into the trap of evaluating ourselves by the worldly standards of success and achievement we find ourselves thinking too much about our own worth in the eyes of others and consequently miss the true value of who we are in God's eyes. CS Lewis said: "True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less". As we grow in faith and Godly transformation so we appreciate more that without God we are nothing and so in humility we see ourselves as God sees us.

Getting this right is so important because it prevents rivalry and self seeking. It prevents putting people on a pedestal or allowing ourselves to be put on a pedestal. It rids us of the view of first and second class Christians. And - it helps to build the body of Christ! Remember - God has created us with a purpose. We are fearfully and wonderfully made. Who we are is far more important to God than anything we do or say.

Now consider this. V4 & 5 "Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others." We are dependant on one another and our Christian fellowship is enhanced by the diversity of our gifts. Paul illustrates through using the analogy of the human body how Christians should live and work together. Jesus is the brain and we are to work together as one body under his authority and command. With our different gifts we help to make up the body under the authority and command of Jesus. But keep in mind - God is the giver of your gifts – so stay sober in your evaluation of yourself recognizing your skills and abilities come to you through God. Now read V6-8 "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully".

Paul message was aimed at the multi-ethnic community of Christians in Rome. But it is just as relevant for us as 21st Century Christians here in Chineham. He was urging them and in the same way is urging us to exercise our God given gifts conscientiously for the common good of all. God gives us gifts so we can build up his church and we are fortunate not to have all the same gifts. But to be an effective body it's important to strive to dedicate our gifts to God's service and not to our personal success. To be willing to use our gifts with everything we've got, to risk ourselves and go for it trusting that God has given us gifts for a purpose.

As a fit Godly body we are better placed to know who we are, accept what we do best and therefore know our own gifts. And then in God's strength we can discern and determine how we can use the gifts he has given us to build up His family, His church. Of course our own individual gifts can't do all the work. We need to give thanks for people who have gifts completely different to our own gifts. Your gifts will balance another person's gifts and visa versa. The important thing is together we can build Christ's Church for God's glory. This means we are dependent upon each other. And therefore each of us have a right under God to expect things of each of us in the body and each of us have responsibilities in the body. The more we work together as one body the more effective we are. As a fit Godly Body we open ourselves up to allow God's spirit to transform and renew our mind's so that individually and collectively together as one body we are able more and more to discern God's

will, evaluating who we are and become an ever more effective part of the body of Christ - risking ourselves and our gifts for the glory of God.

So as one body in Christ let's keep responding to Godly mercy, let's keep opening ourselves to Godly transformation and let us continue becoming a fit Godly body. Let's keep our training going and in God's power expect to witness amazing results! Lets pray.