

Practical Christianity

Part 2

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[00:00:00] Ernie Brown made reference in his opening remarks to a press article that day, reading, Christianity proper is not primarily concerned with changing the outside world, but is concerned with inward change of the individual. Well, my first thought there was, I wonder if that reporter was at Catford on Saturday, and paid due attention to the scriptures that had been read in the afternoon and evening, because really, that was what was the burden of the day, in the light of what God has done for us, in mercy, through his Son, in the light of that, what response are we prepared to make? Indeed, what response is demanded from us? And again, having appreciated the response that is necessary, to what extent do we continue to live in the light of that irrevocable conclusion, [00:01:01] we may well have come to many years ago. Well, certainly, these verses 1 and 2 of chapter 12 of Romans, have indeed that message.

Christianity proper is not primarily concerned with changing the outside world, but is very much a matter of inward change of the individual.

However, having considered that primary matter, one thing that becomes evident in the rest of the epistle, from chapters 12 to 16, is that indeed, the outward behaviour of those who have faith in Christ, certainly that is very changed indeed.

Every aspect, every department, every detail of the life, [00:02:02] is intended to be affected by the appreciation of the goodness of God towards us as individuals. Now, I find it no accident that the next few chapters, which we hope to look into, if the Lord will, detail for us many of the things that are involved. Things that should come to light if that inward change has really taken place. And the way in which every department of our life is looked at, in turn, I would suggest that we commence now, just as a little digression, but a pertinent one, Scriptures here and there, that tell us what these departments of our life are, and the way in which they need to be regulated. [00:03:02] First of all then, let us look at the minor prophet Micah, chapter 6 and verse 8. He hath showed thee, O man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.

Keep in your mind these phrases, to do justly, firstly, secondly, to love mercy, thirdly, to walk humbly with thy God.

Now turn over to Titus, chapter 2, and verse 12.

All well-known verses.

Titus, chapter 2, verse 12.

The grace of God teaches us that denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, [00:04:04] we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.

The three words to notice there are living soberly, righteously, and godly.

Second Timothy, chapter 1.

Sorry, First Epistle of Timothy, chapter 1.

Verse 13.

The Apostle Paul, speaking of himself, he says, Who was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious?

But I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief.

That's all we want to read for the moment. These scriptures, among others, encourage me to conclude [00:05:02] that there are three basic facets of our life as Christians.

Firstly, what we are in ourselves.

Secondly, what we are towards others.

And thirdly, what we are Godward. If you like, selfward, towards others, and Godward.

And as we look at chapters 12, 13, and 14, I'm sure we shall find that in that order, chapter 12 is primarily concerned with what we are in ourselves, what our motives are, why we act and how we act in various situations, in various environments, and yet the emphasis always is not so much what we are doing, but the attitude we have in ourselves in whatever sphere. [00:06:04] Chapter 13, we shall find, is more concerned in the activities, in our relationships with others, whereas chapter 14 is very much a matter of what we are before the Lord. Now, just going over, linking together these other scriptures, in Micah, chapter 6, what we are in ourselves is very much crystallised, the attitude that is desirable is spoken of as loving mercy. What doth the Lord require of you but to love mercy? It's a basic attitude of mind and heart which comes out in our life.

Towards others, what doth the Lord require of you to show mercy? To do justly, doing the right thing.

[00:07:04] Let me say, as I often find myself saying, very often, my difficulty is not knowing what I should be doing, but my difficulty is, I very often don't want to do it. Doing the right thing, doing justly, is all so easy, and yet so difficult. The matter is plain, the scripture is clear, our conscience is touched, we know exactly what we should be doing, and yet we don't want to do it. And again, the third aspect of the life there in Micah 6, walk humbly with thy God.

Oh, let us realise that being not conformed to this world, not taking our character from the external fashion and environment of this world, but being transformed according to the renewing of our minds, [00:08:05] is very much related to what we are in ourselves, what we are towards others, and what we

are before the Lord. I think the best summary of this threefold aspect of life is given in that verse in Titus. The grace of God which has appeared and has been exercised towards us, the God who has been so graciously disposed towards us, the grace of God which has done that, it now teaches us, the grace of God educates us that it is required of us that we live soberly in ourselves, righteously towards others, and godly before the Lord.

[00:09:01] And I would like to suggest that we look at that heading, walking soberly, in Romans chapter 12. A basic outlook that should be true of us.

So chapters 12, 13, and 14, we'll be looking at to see an amplification of what it is to walk soberly in chapter 12, righteously in chapter 13, and godly in chapter 14.

Now, I read that verse in 1 Timothy chapter 1 verse 13, just to give an indication of the tremendous change that took place in Saul of Tarsus.

Speaking of himself, in his eyes, I cannot say it for him, he said it of himself, the chief of sinners, he looked back and said, [00:10:03] I now realize I was wrong in every department of my life.

And he goes into it. He says, as to myself, he said, if you look at the literal meaning of the words, he said, I was an insolent overbearing man. That's what he was in himself. As far as other people were concerned, he said, I was a persecutor.

And as far as God was concerned, he said, I was a blasphemer. Wrong in every department of his life. Now, Paul, having learned the lesson, he's well equipped to give us proper guidance as to how we should live our lives in each of these spheres. So having said that, let us look at the detail of chapter 12. How orderly scripture is.

[00:11:02] How orderly that which comes through the vessel, the apostle, under the control, guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Verses 1 and 2, which we looked at on Saturday, cannot look at again, gives us the overriding principles. If you like, having considered the doctrinal aspects in chapters 1 to 8, the dispensational aspects in chapters 9, 10 and 11, we come to the practical part of the epistle, the answer in our lives in chapters 12 to 16. And verses 1 and 2 give us the heading over the practical part of the epistle, especially chapters 12, 13 and 14.

Now, after that, we get a fairly clear split [00:12:02] in the rest of the chapter.

Verses 3 to 21, overall, give us how we should live soberly.

Now, this is confirmed in the very word that is used in verse 3.

As often happens in the Psalms, so it is in some sections of the New Testament that the first thought expressed, one of the first words that is used, gives us a heading over the section. And here, thinking soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. Now, verses 3 to 8, as such, or certainly 4 to 8, give us a vital consideration, the truth of the body. We'll have to come back to that. Verses 9 to 16, [00:13:01] how that attitude expresses itself within the assembly, and we'll look at that. And then verses 17 to 21, how this attitude is to be shown outside of the assembly with men at large. But we shall note this there when we look at those few verses, that it's not so much the activities themselves, but the personal attitudes, the personal considerations that come to light in these various

spheres.

So let us turn back now to verse 3.

I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.

Let us take account that when the apostle, in verses like this, [00:14:02] in a general way, speaks of any man, he's saying any Christian.

Brother and sister.

In other words, we cannot say, well, half of us are excluded for a start. It's speaking about basic Christian attitudes and is intended to be a challenge to each of us. And it says that we have to have a right assessment of ourselves. Again, these things are so straightforward, direct and simple, aren't they? Have a right assessment of self.

The way it's put here, it would seem that we are all inclined to be charging about, all wanting the cheap place, all wanting to be up and doing, and we need to have the brake applied to us. Well, there may have been times in history, there may have been times in our own lives [00:15:04] where this has been true. But why do we need the challenge of that? That we shouldn't overrate our potential as Christians. I think a far greater danger nowadays is that we tend to underestimate the things that we can do in the Lord's work.

Sadly, nowadays, when there's a job to be done, responsibility to be taken, rare indeed to find a queue of over-enthusiastic individuals demanding that they be allowed to do the job. Sadly, in many localities, it's a question of the few willing horses finding that by dint of necessity that the certain individuals, few of them, [00:16:03] always get the jobs to do because no one else seems to have the time. And of course, the old adage applies, if you really want something doing, ask someone that's busy and they'll make time for it to be done, but those who have a very light program indeed won't be able to squeeze it in, such is human nature. But let us take the warning whichever way it applies to us. Let us not overrate ourselves. Let us not assume that certain things, because they are glamorous or dramatic, are the things that we should be doing so that we can receive the acclaim of the Brethren. But at the same time, let us avoid the twin danger of self-effacement to the degree where it becomes mock humility, mock modesty, and saying, [00:17:01] oh, whatever it is, you can't expect me to do that, I'm just a lowly brother, I'm just a humble sister, don't expect great things from me. We need to be conscious that as the truth of the body is the figure that's introduced here, there is a part for us to play and once we are aware whatever role we should be filling, the exhortation here is, get on with it!

That's how I read these verses. As in other scriptures, for comparison, Ephesians 4 looks at the truth of the body and the matter of gifts. In Ephesians 4, the gifts come down bestowed from the ascended head in heaven. 1 Corinthians 12, the truth of the body there, the gifts are bestowed and are to be executed in the power of the Holy Spirit. [00:18:03] But here, in keeping with the context, tracing things back to their source, we find that the gifts are given by God.

But, the lesson I would like to draw in the time available is this. The figure of the body is intended to give us the impression of that which is an integrated whole working for the good of all with each

fulfilling the role for which it is rightly designed. No argument between the members of the body, each knows the role that it has to play. We all know that in the natural body that if one member or organ of the body is deficient or if there is any disability, [00:19:01] anything distorted, that there has to be a measure of compensation. Another member, another organ has to try and make up for whatever is lacking. So it is in the body of Christ.

If I am not doing that which God has designed me for and fitted me into the integrated whole, it means that there will be more strain on someone else because I am not doing what I should be doing. Now, I will leave for your private meditation what these various roles are.

But the impression I get in them all is that whatever it is, get on with it!

Not in any ostentatious, flamboyant, extravagant way, but there is a job of work to be done and very often if the Lord makes me aware [00:20:02] of a particular need in my own locality, it is at least half an indication that he wants me to do it. And certainly if in a quiet way there is something to be done, I make my services available, it will soon become obvious whether or not I have any gift in that particular direction. And I am sure that if there is a job to be done for which I am suited and I apply myself, not thinking more highly or less highly of myself than I ought to think, I am sure my local brethren will be glad to identify themselves with what I am trying to do to help things on locally. Now, just in passing, I was very much encouraged when verse 7, the first part of verse 7 was explained to me.

I remember a very mature brother [00:21:03] saying to me, do you want to minister? And I said, oh that's way beyond me. And he said, well do you know what it means? He says, to minister, he says, is standing by to lend a hand.

Well that was a very homely way of putting it. And I thought it was a good one. Without thinking more highly of myself than I ought to think, wouldn't I like to be one of those locally who's always standing by to lend a hand to be available for any little job that comes along and willing to take the strain. And I'm sure, if we look at these terms in a similarly simple way, we'll find that we needn't exclude ourselves at all.

But, what is emphasized in each of these cases is the need that is there, the way that God has gifted one or another [00:22:02] to do the job.

One of the things involved at the end of verse 3 and verse 6 is that if God places a gift within the assembly in an individual, he will also endow that individual with the capacity to carry it out.

There's a balance between the gift that needs to be exercised and the faith and the grace that God makes available in order that it might be put to good use. Now, that's a summary there, and he ends that section in verse 8 with a reminder. It's not so much what is done, but the way that is done that will need the lasting impression. How often [00:23:02] has there been a difficulty amongst brethren, not because of what has been done, but because of the way in which it's been done. Oh, let us ensure that while we are assured before the Lord that what we are doing is the right thing, and that he wants us to do it, that we do it in a way which doesn't give offence, even to the matter of showing mercy with cheerfulness. Now, that is verses 4 to 8.

The living soberly, having a right estimation of ourselves coming out in the truth of the body in the

assembly. I suppose we should pause there. Do I take it from this and other similar scriptures that the first outlet for my activities and energies [00:24:02] should be in my local assembly?

If the Lord has been pleased to show me that a certain group of Christians in a locality or where I should be as my spiritual home, if I feel free to indulge the various privileges that are available there, shouldn't that really be the first sphere in which my activities should be seen? In everything that takes place that I do, in good conscience before the Lord, be related first of all to that. That certainly seems to be one of the things that comes out in the verses.

Now, certainly the verses that follow, 9 to 16, refer not so much to the expression of the gifts that come to light, but the general [00:25:02] tenor of the fellowship of local Christians. And again, no time for all the detail, but notice this kind of thing.

Verses 9 to 13 give such a high quality of the expression of practical Christianity that one would tend to think well, this certainly is the way to universal popularity. Any Christian acting like this, won't all their fellow believers think they are absolutely wonderful? Not always so.

Verse 14 goes on to say bless them which persecute you, bless and curse not. The Lord Jesus in his personal ministry while here upon earth, and all the major apostles bring it to light in their [00:26:02] ministry, remind us that one thing we cannot be assured of, if we serve the Lord with all our might, in good conscience, not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, one thing that's sure is that Satan will ensure that problems come along. And perhaps it may well be, those that we love the most, those we want to serve most dearly, our local brethren that we see so often and think so much of, it may well be that it is in that very sphere where we are misunderstood, things we say and do are misconstrued, misinterpreted, even to the point where we feel that we are almost getting a persecution mainly. Well, the apostle says, even in this, your attitude, whether with your fellow [00:27:02] Christians or even those without, has to be so Christ-like that there's nothing about your reaction to unjust persecution that could give rise to any offense.

It's a high standard. It's always true that the Lord never brings his standards down to the measure of our finite experience. He always gives us the potential and the incentive of being drawn up to be a pattern which is commensurate with the grace that is being shown towards us. Another thing, verse 15, Rejoice with them that do rejoice, weep with them that weep.

Nothing new under the sun, you know.

A word which has crept into the English language over [00:28:02] the past, I don't know, 20, 30, 40 years, I suppose, is this idea of empathy, of entering into others' feelings, putting yourself in their shoes, knowing what makes them tick, knowing how they would react in a certain situation so that you can help them. We are exhorted here to act just like that. Our attitude has to be such that we are willing to enter into the joys of others, enter into the sorrows of others, to feel for them, to have fellowship with them in whatever the Lord is bringing them through at the present time. And of course, the supreme example, the Lord Jesus himself became qualified to be the great high priest, the great priest over the house of God, learning obedience in the things that he suffered, able to [00:29:02] enter into the things that we have to bear, and so, able to sympathize, succor, and save. The truth of the high priestly grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. But, he ends this section, verse 16, be of the same mind one to another. If we all exhibited the features in this sober self-assessment, not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think, what a difference it would make when we have business to

discuss, arrangements to make, when there's outreach to be undertaken, when we have problems, financial problems, ecclesiastical problems, whatever they may be, if each conducted himself and herself in this way, what a tremendous difference it would make. Be of the same mind one toward another, mind not [00:30:02] high things, be not high-minded, condescend to men of lower state. I suppose it's one of the cases where the authorized version tends to give a slightly wrong impression, no idea of condescension, going along with the lowly, as it might more accurately be rendered. The figure is something like this.

If I'm taking a little child for a walk, my normal stride might be about four feet. The little toddler I'm taking for a walk may have a normal step of about say, a foot.

Now, it would be most cruel of me, wouldn't it, to race along and yanking the little child along by the arm, expecting it to measure my stride step for step.

[00:31:02] Of course, what a sympathetic parent or adult does, the normal stride of the adult is shortened to accommodate the normal step of the little child or toddler. And I'm sure that's the figure that's employed here. Going along with the lowly, not demanding that those with the shorter stride have to attempt to overreach themselves and suffer strain.

But there's lots of dignity, isn't there, in an adult accommodating this normal stride to that of the toddler. In fact, there's a particular charm, isn't there, when an adult is seen to be caring and loving and sympathetic and guiding the toddler along step by step. I would suggest that something of that is involved in going along with the lowly.

[00:32:02] And not with any over self-esteem again. Be not wise in your own conceits. Now, the last point that needs to be dealt with in verses 17 to 21, the attitude to others. Now, this is not yet activities towards them as such. That comes more particularly in chapter 13.

But here, one aspect of living soberly with a right estimation of self is the way in which we act. The way in which we react, we might say, when others are acting unfairly towards us. It is not a Christian virtue to react violently. It is not a Christian virtue to try and get our own back. And I think, as we read this, [00:33:02] the fundamental impression is, if we suffer wrong, if we are treated unjustly, leave it with the Lord. Oh, how easy to say. How hard to do. Just the Lord will recompense. If there's vengeance to be administered, leave that to the Lord. When the Lord, the righteous judge, shall set things right.

We are now in the day, the period, which is characterized by what is termed in scripture the patient waiting of the Christ. Not waiting for Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ, who deserves every honor, who deserves the highest place of esteem.

He's patiently waiting, not forcing the issue, [00:34:02] not demanding it, not trying to set things right by himself.

He's waiting until the Father gives the word, and then he that shall come will come and will not tarry. In the meantime, the Lord Jesus is patiently waiting. We are in the day of the patient waiting of the Christ.

If the Lord Jesus, in perfect grace, the one who deserves every honor, every acclaim, if he is willing to wait until matters are set right, if he's prepared to wait patiently until then, if we are to be Christlike

in our activities, in our attitudes, we have to have this fundamental matter of waiting patiently that if things need to be put right, it will be the Lord Jesus who does it. I think we could well take away this very difficult verse. 20 [00:35:02] If thine enemy hunger, feed him. If he thirst, give him drink. For in so doing thou shalt heap calls of fire on his head.

Bit of a paradox.

Sounds as though, if I'm done wrong, I can rub my hands in unhappy anticipation and say, it's alright, the Lord will sort him out, calls of fire on his head, the kinder I am to him, the worse he'll get. Of course it doesn't mean that at all. It's not a prayer, it's a statement of fact. There are other scriptures like this, which state in a simple, clear way that if there is any sorting out to be done, any adjustment to be made of others, it is our portion to wait patiently, leave it to the Lord, and in fact, if we are gracious and loving and kind as the verse indicates, [00:36:02] it will ensure even more that the Lord, the righteous judge, when he comes, will take whatever action is necessary. And when we consider the times that we have been unjustly treated, unfairly assessed, where we have been burning with a sense of injustice, think of the many times where perhaps we have misjudged others, that we would come down on them like a ton of bricks when we were sure we were right and they were wrong. How better if at both the giving and the receiving end, we act in the way that Romans 12 outlines, not thinking more highly or less highly of ourselves than others, but leaving things to the Lord. Perhaps, as we come to the close, perhaps the wisest attitude of all, for each of us would be, to be as generous as possible [00:37:02] in our assessment of others and as hard as we like to be with ourselves.

Perhaps the flesh in us tends to underestimate the virtue in others and overestimate the virtue in ourselves. Let us so carry out the plain injunctions of Romans chapter 12 that it will be seen that the first call upon our thinking is this, that the grace of God has indeed educated us to think soberly while here in this present world. Our closing hymn tonight is number 88.

I haven't been able to find many hymns which directly comment on the kind of thing that's in Romans 12, but I have found these hymns which tell us of the virtue seen to perfection in the Lord Jesus Christ. [00:38:02] And I'm sure one of the things involved in the opening exhortations in Romans 12 is that in taking account of the mercy of God we spend time in happy holy contemplation of the Son of God in whom these things are seen to perfection.