

Romans 12.1-8

A different life

Christ Church

Sunday 20 February 2022

Rooted Disciples [2]

Rooted

Today we are on our second week of our series called Rooted Disciples, following John Stott's book *The Radical Disciple*.

I begin with an apology – I confused some of you last week because I actually began with the *last* chapter of the book. I won't bore you with the reasons why, but today we go back to the beginning, to chapter 1.

The series is called 'Rooted' for two reasons:

1. My prayer is that through this series we put down deeper roots and grow stronger in Jesus;
2. And that we each grow more (wholly and holy) as disciples, all the way down to the deepest roots of our life.

Therefore (1)

It's curious, the way we read the Bible in church; when we read a novel, we don't open it at some random page and start reading a random paragraph... at least, I don't!

That's one of the reasons why I prefer having physical Bible books. It's much easier to see where we are in the overall picture, and it's much easier to see what's going on either side of the snippet we read in a particular service.

That's always important – but it is *especially* important when you see a word like 'but' or 'therefore'. They remind us that what we are reading isn't isolated but is part of something bigger. Here, in Romans chapter 12 verse 1, is one of the biggest, strongest, most important '**therefore**'s in the whole Bible.

Paul has spent eleven chapters explaining: the seriousness of sin; the way God stays faithful even when we are not; how God forgives us, saves us, gives us life through Jesus even though we don't deserve it; that it is all a gift for those who put their trust in God; how he adopts us into a new family and gives us his Holy Spirit; and that we must not domesticate God but praise his glory and wisdom and sovereign power.

Therefore, he says (1), **in view of God's mercy**... in the light of who God is and all he has done for us, **therefore**... this is what it means to be his people. Paul moves from theology to practice, from God's gift to God's call, from gospel truth to gospel living.

He does this in almost all his letters: he begins with what God has done, and then moves onto how disciples must live. Why that way round? Because all we do as disciples is a response to what God has already done for us in Jesus.

We don't need to earn God's love, his life, or his gifts. In fact we can't: the price is too great. We don't need to impress God, or pass an exam, or jump through a hoop or over a bar. All God has done for us is a gift given to those who put their trust in him.

Think of all God has done as a horse. Bear with me.

What *we* do – that is the cart. And we all know where the cart goes: before the horse, or after the horse?

After, of course: as the old English proverb says, don't put the cart before the horse...

Of course you wouldn't, that would be ridiculous. But so often we think and act as though we need to earn God's love. No: the life of a disciple is lived as a **therefore**, a *response* to **God's mercy**.

Sacrifice (1)

A woman was in a terrible accident where her face was severely burned. The doctor told her husband they couldn't graft any skin from *her* body. So, the husband offered to donate some – and the only place that was suitable was his, well, his bottom. The wife agreed on one condition: that they tell no one where the skin had come from.

After the surgery, everyone was astounded at the woman's new beauty. She was even more beautiful than before! All her friends and relatives couldn't stop talking about how her newfound youthful features.

One day, alone with her husband, she was overcome with emotion at his sacrifice for her. 'My dear,' she said, 'I want to thank you for everything you did for me. There is no way I could ever repay you.'

'Darling,' he replied, 'think nothing of it. I get all the thanks I need every time I see your mother kiss you on the cheek.'

Last week we looked at how being a disciple of Jesus is costly: Jesus said (Mark 8.34), **'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.'**

I suspect Paul had those very words in mind as he wrote:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.

Romans 12.1 (NIV)

Like the literal sacrifices in the Old Testament, Paul calls us to be **holy**. This is the most important word to describe how God's people should live. It means 'different', 'perfect', 'set apart for serving God'. In Matthew 6.8 Jesus says, '**Do not be like them**': neither the pagans, nor the religious hypocrites. In Leviticus 18.3 God says to Moses: '**You must not do as they do.**'

This is the **sacrifice** side of holiness: *not* living as the world does, identifying our sin so we can stop doing it with God's help – traditionally called *mortification*. It's not easy, and it's costly.

The Bible contains a number of things God tells us *not* to do – but far more it gives the positive picture of how we can live a **holy** life **pleasing to God**.

He wants us to pray – not so people see, but in secret so we can be honest, learn to listen to God, get to know him. That was Jesus' point when he said, '**Do not be like them,**' in Matthew 6.

He wants us to read the Scriptures, to hear him speak, to learn his ways, to be encouraged, challenged, inspired.

He wants us to receive his Spirit so we can be renewed, grow in faith, use his gifts, serve the church, bless the world.

He wants us to become more like Jesus, the perfect example of what it means to be a human being.

But as well as being **holy and pleasing to God**, Paul describes our **sacrifice** as **living**. It's a journey, something we do one step, one day at a time, something we don't do all at once. Sometimes we go in the right direction, sometimes we wander off. Being a disciple of Jesus is something we *live*: it isn't simply something we do in a church building, but every*where* and every*when*.

This is **true and proper worship**. Worship is more than singing Christian songs. Worship is more than coming to church or joining in on Zoom on a Sunday morning. Worship is more than going to a midweek prayer meeting, or a home group. It is all that – but it should also be everything else. It involves our bodies, our minds, our spirits, our hearts, our homes, our workplaces, our leisure, our joys, our struggles, our hopes, our fears – the lot. **True and proper worship** is a whole life lived wholly for God.

Repeat

Transformation (2)

A woman who lived next door to a preacher was puzzled by his personality change. At home he was shy, quiet, retiring – but in church he was a fiery preacher, rousing the people in the name of God. It was as if he were two different people.

One day she asked him about the dramatic transformation that came over him when he preached.

‘Ah,’ he said, ‘That’s my *alter ego*.’

John Wimber, who started the Vineyard church movement, said, ‘Come as you are, don’t stay as you are.’ It’s another way of describing the **therefore** in Romans 12.1.

Romans 1-11 says, because God’s mercy and grace and life are a gift, we can come as we are, no matter who we are, no matter what we have done, no matter what we struggle with – we can come to God as we are. But Paul doesn’t end in chapter 11 – he continues into chapter 12: **therefore**, he says, because God has done all of this, **in view of God’s mercy**,

Do not conform to the pattern of this world [or this age], but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Romans 12.2 (NIV)

Come as you are, don't stay as you are.

In his teaching Jesus regularly contrasted this present age with the age to come. The present age is evil and rebellious; the age to come is God's kingdom which is breaking into the here and now.

That means we have a choice: which do we want to live in?

Humans are great at copying. It's how we learn to speak as babies and toddlers. It's how we learn new skills, it's how we learn habits – good or bad.

The present age is oh-so-easy to copy. It's everywhere, it's all around us. It's so easy to **conform to the pattern of this world**. But that is not the way for Jesus' disciples: **do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed**.

When the Bible talks about the **mind** or the heart, it usually means the same thing: our inner consciousness, our personality, who we are inside. *That* needs to be renewed – how? By the power of God's Spirit at work within us. By learning to pray and focus ourselves on Jesus. By reading Scripture so we learn what God has said, what he has done, how he thinks – as the psalmist says (Psalm 25.4): **show me your ways, Lord, teach me your paths**. We need to copy God's ways, not the world's ways.

Four ways

In this week's chapter Stott puts it like this:

We are neither to seek to preserve our holiness by escaping from the world, nor to sacrifice our holiness by conforming to the world. ...

Here then is God's call to a radical discipleship, to a radical non-conformity to the surrounding culture. It is a call to ... engagement without compromise.

John Stott, The Radical Disciple, 19 & 21

He suggests four contemporary trends that challenge the church, that make life difficult for disciples, that we need to be aware of so we can resist and instead live as Jesus did.

1. **Pluralism.** This is the teaching that every 'ism' is equally valid and right. We engage with great humility – and not a hint of superiority. But we must stand firm in the truth that Jesus is unique, that salvation is found nowhere else.
2. **Materialism.** This is more than simply enjoying physical things, it is a preoccupation with them. We engage by showing a different way, by living simply, being generous, learning to be content with what we have.

3. **Ethical relativism.** We see this everywhere. Honesty is abandoned in favour of 'what works for me'. The highest good isn't a moral standard but what's 'in your heart'. And yes, this relativism has affected sexual ethics as well. This is how John Stott says disciples should engage:

We are not to be completely rigid in our ethical decision-making, but seek sensitively to apply biblical principles in each situation. Fundamental to Christian behaviour is the lordship of Jesus Christ. 'Jesus is Lord' remains the basis of our life.

John Stott, The Radical Disciple, 25

4. **Narcissism.** This is excessive love for the self, focusing inwards, exploring ourselves, making our desires the ruling force of our life. We engage through a combination of self-affirmation and self-denial: affirming what comes from God and redemption, and denying what comes from sin.

There are more trends and challenges of course – but these four John Stott highlights as particular issues for the church today: pluralism, materialism, ethical relativism, and narcissism.

Do you recognise any of those in your life? Do you see those attitudes affecting your faith, your journey of discipleship? Do you need to engage differently, more faithfully, more generously?

Brothers and sisters (1)

Living a different life has two sides: giving up and turning away from the world's way, then taking up and turning towards God's way. It isn't so we can earn God's love and favour, but the way disciples respond to God's mercy to us in Jesus.

And it's hard. Paul calls us **brothers and sisters** (1): we are God's new family. So I encourage you this week: don't try to struggle on with this by yourself, but be honest and let's share our journey of discipleship with one another; let's help one another live a different life: God's life, reflecting Jesus' life.