

Session 9: Community.

How can we live together in love?

Welcome to Session 9 of our teaching series on Romans. In this session you will find worship song suggestions, a sermon outline and a written prayer.

KEY VERSE:

‘For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit ...’

ROMANS 14.17 (NIV)

BIBLE READINGS:

Romans 13–14

MAIN QUESTION:

How can we good citizens in both God's Kingdom and secular society?

MAIN THEMES:

Citizenship, submission, authority, love and the law, the weak and the strong.

Context:

Paul continues to explore how we live in the light of the gospel, especially in a world that is hostile and a church community that is fragile. In a context of persecution and martyrdom, the Roman church faced both external and internal pressures, which Paul continues to address in this section of his letter. The radical ideas of loving our enemies and serving one another as a body of Christ are explored in more detail here, as Paul considers the church's attitude to secular government and internal disagreements.

Summary:

We are called to put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light. This will have implications for how we submit ourselves to human authorities, and how we submit to each other as God's church.

WORSHIP SONG SUGGESTIONS:

- Build Your Kingdom Here
- The Heart of Worship
- I Surrender
- Goodness of God
- Graves Into Gardens
- Build My Life
- Be Thou My Vision
- Crown Him With Many Crowns

Reflections:

Christians do not live in an isolated bubble. Just as the believers in Rome had to consider their attitude towards the government and ruling authorities, so do we. Paul writes to a community which is under pressure and yet he urges them to submit to governing bodies, because they have been given authority by God. This section must however be balanced with the rest of Scripture, and the tension between obeying God and obeying man must be considered.

Having thought about being citizens of secular societies, Paul also addresses specific issues that might come up in the community of Christ. He addresses the issues that were contested at his time, particularly relevant for Jews and Gentiles, when it came to food and religious holidays. These issues might be less relevant for us today, but the principles are timeless. The idea of putting unity over individual needs and desires is a radical idea today – one that may be challenging for us to hear, but is increasingly important to live out in a divided world.

Overall, the command to put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armour of light applies to both aspects of the Christian life. In the light of eternity, we know worldly authority will fade away and we need to focus on uniting the church around eternal matters. The challenge in this sermon is to steer your congregation away from endlessly discussing the details around secondary theological issues and point them towards the timeless reminder that the eternal kingdom of God is one of righteousness, peace and joy.

The sermon notes cover both Romans 13 and 14. However, in your context it may be best to focus on one chapter more than the other. For example, if a church is experiencing division and factions are developing, Romans 14 may be most important, but if the church risks being a holy huddle that is not impacting wider society then Romans 13 may be more timely.

NOTES

Horizontal lines for notes

Suggested sermon outline

INTRODUCTION

Recap from previous sermons. Remind your congregation that works flow from salvation, not the other way around. Yet, the Christian life is one that is lived out in the light of God’s mercy, and we are all called to clothe ourselves in Jesus Christ.

Start with exploring Romans 13.11–12, and explain how we live in the light of our salvation, expecting this world to pass away. Perhaps include an illustration of how things are clearer in the light than in the darkness.

Living in the light means we see certain issues, like obedience to authority and putting our own preferences aside for the sake of unity, very differently. In the light of eternity, we can discern which matters are worth fighting for, and which are less important. This will enable us to live with a healthy perspective of our citizenship in two kingdoms: our earthly citizenship, and our citizenship of heaven.

KEY POINTS: TWO HARD TRUTHS

1 Citizens in society (Romans 13)

- ‘For there is no authority except that which God has established’

Paul calls the church in Rome to submit themselves to the authorities, which in their time must have been incredibly challenging. He calls them to give what is owed, whether that is taxes, respect, or honour. How can your church make sure that they live in ways which respect authorities as far as possible, recognising their God-given authority?

Do members of your church tend to be overly challenging when it comes to government authority, or do they tend to be overly compliant?

Check out the series book for examples of how authorities should be respected, but also held to account. You will find examples like Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Harriet Tubman, who, inspired by their faith, protested against oppressive regimes.

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2 Members of the church (Romans 14)

- **'For none of us lives for ourselves alone, and none of us dies for ourselves alone.'**

Paul addresses debates around eating certain foods and observing certain holidays to remind the Roman church that they should not pass unnecessary judgement, nor put any stumbling block in the way for someone else.

He reminds them to 'make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification'.

What issues are alive in your church at the moment which threaten the peace and unity of your congregation? Does your congregation tend to be overly lenient or overly judgemental when it comes to issues of Christian living? What truths do they need to be reminded of from this passage?

Paul reminds us to act 'in love' (verse 15), and emphasises the unity of the church over individual need or desire. In our society the idea of limiting our own liberty for the sake of others is unpopular, so this could be a way in which the church can be radically different.

Remember to point your congregation to the primary truths of the gospel, and to avoid getting caught up in the discussions about secondary issues which Paul warns about here. 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating or drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (verse 17).

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CONCLUSION

How do we live in the light of this?

Below are some suggested points of application. Feel free to select a couple of points which are most appropriate to your setting.

- Circle back to Romans 13.11–12 and remind your congregation that we live in a new light. Because the night is nearly over and the day is almost here, we can put aside our own desires, and submit ourselves to human authorities and to each other, and in this way honour Christ.
- Some people would like to disregard the elected government entirely because of their opposition to one, or a few, of their policies. Could an application of Paul's words today be that while we are right to challenge ungodly policies, this does not mean that we should rebel against the people in power and refuse to submit to even their reasonable uses of authority?
- We see church leaders doing this effectively when they make statements about things like the treatment of refugees, for example. When they do this, they are not calling for the overthrow of the government, but for laws and policies to be just.
- Are there any issues which are causing disunity in your church – e.g. as in verse 13 – drunkenness, sexual immorality, dissension, jealousy? How can you remind people to clothe themselves in Christ instead?
- Conclude with that wonderful reminder that one day 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God' (Romans 14.11). Let's look forwards to this day.

READING
SUGGESTIONS:

- *Romans: A Letter That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton
- *The Message of Romans* by John Stott
- *Romans 8–16 For You* by Timothy Keller

WRITTEN
PRAYER

Lord Jesus, as your ambassadors please give us wisdom in how we live in this world. Help us to acknowledge you as Lord while submitting to authorities. Help us to stand up for justice, fairness and equality in the world. Help us also to reflect on where we might be bringing disunity or division and to work with others towards reconciliation and peace. You call us to be the light of the world; help us serve you well and build your kingdom in this world. Amen.