

Have genuine sympathy towards others

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church 5rd May 2019

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.
(Romans 12.15)*

Introduction

Today in our studies in Romans chapter 12 we come to verse 15, which speaks about the loving attitude that we are to have towards our fellow believers.

We see from this verse that we should not merely do good practically towards other believers. We should indeed, as we have seen in previous verses, do what we can to help other believers practically. But these verses tell us that as well as helping other believers practically, we should also have a loving attitude towards them. Indeed, it could be argued that, of the two, it is the attitude that counts more than anything. Remember how the apostle said, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:3)

The apostle says "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."

What the apostle speaks about here is the exact opposite of how we naturally react to what happens to others. Our natural reaction is to be miserable when others are blessed, and to be glad when bad things happen to them. We tend so easily to make comparisons between our lot in life and the lot in life of others, and to feel miserable if they appear to be doing better than ourselves, and to feel happy, or at least to have a sense of grim satisfaction, if they appear not to be doing so well as us.

This can happen in every area of life. Rather than rejoicing with the bride and groom, an unmarried person can easily feel miserable when one of his or her friends gets married. It is all too easy for someone who has not been able to have children to feel miserable when a friend is rejoicing over the birth of his or her child. At work, if a work colleague gets promoted or gets a pay rise, the natural inclination of a colleague who has not had a pay rise will be to feel unhappy, rather than to rejoice

with the person who has had the pay rise. This can also happen in Christian work. A pastor who has been working long and hard in a situation where there has been little fruit can be tempted to be miserable when he hears of another church where there are many converts and the church is blossoming.

What is at the root of this wrong reaction to the blessing that others know? Is it not the age old sin of envy? Was this not Cain's sin? He envied his brother Abel, and felt miserable because Abel's offering was accepted by God. This was the beginning of Cain's hatred that led him to murder Abel.

What lies at the root of envy? Is it not essentially self-centredness? Is it not that we have made ourselves the very centre of our lives and thinking? Have we not made it our primary goal in life to bring happiness to ourselves?

Paul says to us that rather than feeling miserable when others have reason to rejoice, we should genuinely rejoice with them. We should be glad with them and for them, even if we have never known such blessing ourselves, and have no prospect of knowing it. We should love others so much that we are genuinely pleased for them if good things happen to them.

Then he says, according to our translation, "mourn with those who mourn." The literal translation is "weep with those who weep."

Again, this is totally contrary to how we naturally respond to those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Our natural response, so often, is to feel secretly glad if someone else suffers. We naturally say to ourselves, "Thank God it was not me." We close off our hearts. We even gloat over the misfortunes of others.

The apostle urges us instead to feel a genuine sympathy with those who suffer, and to weep with them in their sorrow.

How can we conquer the horrible and ugly sin of envy that so easily besets us? The key, as with all the things that the apostle says in this chapter, is to be transformed in the way that we think. As we change the way that we think, we will get over the terrible self-preoccupation that we naturally have, and instead become focussed upon God and upon others. Let me mention some truths that will help us to overcome this dreadful sin of envy, and help us to become more sympathetic towards others.

1. Remember who is God

We naturally tend to think of ourselves as the centre of the universe. We effectively make ourselves into gods, and expect the whole world to revolve around us.

But we are not the centre of the universe. God is. We need to remember this, and allow this truth to transform the way that we think. He is God. We are dust. He is the potter. We are the clay.

In Isaiah chapter 29 verse 16, God speaks through the prophet to his people, challenging them, saying, "You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay! Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, 'He did not make me'? Can the pot say of the potter, 'He knows nothing'?"

Isaiah chapter 45 verse 9 says similarly, "Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' Does your work say, 'He has no hands'?"

We need to remember who is the Creator, and who is the creature. We are dust. We have no rights. He can do with us and with others as he pleases. If he chooses to bless others in one way, and not to bless us, this is entirely within his right and power.

2. Think about the Cross.

Think about the terrible suffering that Jesus went through in order to save you from your sin, and how, entirely by his grace you have been saved. When we think about the Cross, all pride and self-centredness must go.

The apostle writes in Galatians chapter 6 verses 14 and 15, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."

As Isaac Watts puts it in his hymn, "When I survey the wondrous Cross, on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count as loss, and pour contempt on all my pride."

3. Consider yourself to be dead

If you are a believer, you have been united with Christ in his death and in his resurrection. Your old life is dead. If that is the case, then you should also consider yourself dead to this world. We should not worry about our status in this world, or how rich we are, or how successful, or how healthy. These things are of no great significance. If the Lord blesses us in these areas, we can thank him. If he chooses to withhold blessing, we can also thank him. The thing that really matters is that we are known by God and loved by him.

4. Fix your mind on Christ his glory

One sure cure of self-obsession is to fix your thoughts on Christ in glory. The apostle Paul writes in Colossians chapter 3 verses 1 – 4,

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Think about Christ in heaven. See him, by faith, seated on his throne, reigning in majesty. Think about the great work that he is doing, establishing his kingdom and bringing the lost to himself. Be preoccupied with Christ and his great work, and forget about yourself and your own petty concerns. As we focus on Christ, we will become more and more like him. The apostle says in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 verses 17 and 18,

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect [or contemplate] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

5. Think about how loved you are by God

If you belong to Christ, God set his affection upon you before the foundation of the world. He chose you, that you should belong to him and that you should be adopted as his child. He has loved you with an everlasting love. He gave his only begotten Son to die on the Cross for you. At the right time he brought you into contact with the Gospel, and moved you to believe it. He washed away your sins. He filled you with

his Spirit. He has continued to love you in spite of your many failings as a believer. Whatever you do is utterly incapable of stopping God from loving you. His love is like a mighty flood that sweeps all your rebellion and sin before it. And he will continue loving you until the end of the age. Nothing will ever separate you from the love of God.

When we really appreciate how much God loves us, it is impossible for us not to love others. The coldest, most mean heart is melted down by the love of God. Think about his love for you, and ask him by his Spirit to give you a bigger appreciation of that love. Then you will start to find that you have genuine love and concern for others.

6. Think about heaven and hell

To help us rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep, remember your reward. Remember where you are heading. Remember what is coming to you. Yes, you might not have very much in this life. You might suffer from ill health. You might be poor. You might have many family worries. You might have a very ordinary job or no job at all. You might live in a very small flat which is shabby and cold and only has broken furniture. But it doesn't matter because if you are a Christian you are the heir of unspeakable blessing in the world to come, Therefore you don't need to envy others, whether other believers or other non-believers when they are blessed, because you have something so wonderful; such a glorious inheritance. Are you familiar with Psalm 73? It is a great antidote to envy, especially envy of the wicked. We read in verses 1 to 3, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

The Psalmist saw these wicked people prospering. He felt miserable, he felt envious of them. He carries on in verses 4 to 12,

They have no struggles, their bodies are healthy and strong. 5 They are free from the burdens common to man they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace, they clothe themselves with violence; from their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say "How can God

know? Does the Most High have knowledge?” This is what the wicked are like – always carefree, they increase in wealth.

So you have these wicked people and they seem to be doing really well! Some what some say, “serve the Lord and you get rich, disobey God and you’ll get poor”, but this seems to be the other way round. It is the people who are not serving the Lord who are doing very nicely, thank you: healthy, well fed, prosperous, living in lovely houses, full of ease, full of comfort. The Psalmist is saying, effectively “Have I done something wrong by serving the Lord?” He is starting to feel envious of those who are doing wrong. He carries on in verses 13 and 14, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and in vain I have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued, I have been punished every morning.

He is saying “Have I made a mistake to follow God? Perhaps if I had been a sinner like these sinners I would have had a comfortable life like them and everything would have been fine for me; perhaps I am making a big big mistake in my life.” Then he says in verses 15 and 16, “If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.”

He was getting all confused thinking “What is the point of being a believer, being a Christian, in serving God?” but when he went to the temple and fixed his mind on God again, then he remembered what is going to happen to them. They are going to be judged. Then where will those riches go? So he says in verses 18 to 20, “Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.”

He remembered what is going to happen to the wicked. They are going to lose everything they’ve got and land up in hell. He realises he should not envy them but actually feel sorry for them. He then realises how silly he had been. He had started to think like an animal. He says in verses 21 and 22, “When my heart was grieved and my spirit was embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you.”

Now however, he starts to see things clearly and to think with a proper perspective. He concludes in verses 23 to 28,

Yet I am always with you, you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And the earth has nothing I desire besides you. My heart and my flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

So here is a great antidote to envy: to remember the future, to remember what is going to happen to the wicked but also to remember what will happen to **you** if you trust in Christ.

Conclusion

What we have been thinking about this morning is the command “Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.” I have been trying to give you some pointers to help you to put this into practice. My aim has been to help you to actually have this heart that is warm towards others, that actually genuinely does rejoice with those who rejoice and really does have this concern and sorrow for those who are sorrowful. I have suggested six things to help us to do this;

1. Remember who is God
2. Think about the cross
3. Consider yourself to be dead
4. Fix your mind on Christ in glory
5. Think about how much you are loved by God
6. Think about the future.

I suggest that if you are a Christian, as you take these thoughts into your mind, and accept these truths and think about these things, you will find you start to overcome this dreadful sin of self-absorption and envy and instead you start to have this outward going, Christ centred and others-centred view of life.

None of those things I have said which are a comfort and a help apply to you unless you are a true Christian. So I need to say as we finish, “Are you saved? Are you a Christian?” If you are not a Christian you will not be able to do what this talks about, to genuinely rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep because you will not

have the equipment that God gives to those who are his. So I would say to you with great urgency and with all the feeling I can muster in my soul, "Please, if you have not yet been saved, please, I beg of you, come to Jesus; ask him to save you." You've got nothing to lose in any real sense by coming to Christ, and everything to gain. Don't put it off any longer. Some of you have been here to meetings for a long time, some for less time, but probably **all of you** have heard enough to know what you need to do. You simply need to confess that you are a hell-deserving sinner. You need to turn from your sins and ask Jesus to save you. If you have never prayed in that way or you are not sure that you have ever done so, I would beseech you to do it urgently. Come to Jesus so that you can know his love and his life flowing through you so that you can be the sort of loving and kind person that God wants you to be. May God speak to us through his word and may he cause us to be genuinely loving and kind.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

<https://www.sermonaudio.com/sermoninfo.asp?SID=54191943516493>

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