

# Living the Jesus Story as the Way to Peace

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Date: 04 August 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] Today we're going to be continuing our series on Romans, and part of what I'm going to be doing today is taking some time to deep dive in one of the chapters in Romans, Romans 12.

But in order to focus on that, I'm going to start with a very specific scripture that is deeply important to my development as a person, Proverbs 31.

I don't know how many of you all know about this scripture, but it is a litany of what a virtuous woman is supposed to be. So several years ago, I started bringing, well, I should say that a little differently, several decades ago, I started bringing my knitting with me to church and knitting during sermons.

I'm ADHD, it really helps me focus, but I can't say that it was entirely altruistic that I was doing that. The church I was at at the time in the Midwest, I had some kind of issues with it, but anyway, it raised more than a few eyebrows. And people would very passive-aggressively comment on it.

[ 1 : 12 ] And in my very pedantic and oh-so-snotty way, since one of the verses in Proverbs 31 can be translated as, she knits clothes for her family, I would tell people, I'm just doing my part to be a Proverbs 31 woman.

Now, you might wonder why I, the Becky you see before you, was so sneering about parts of our holy text. But I grew up hearing about the Proverbs 31 woman in Midwestern churches, and it was very prevalent in religious ephemera, and it was painted as this prescription of behavior, this list of shoulds to make you a godly woman, the things you need to contort yourself into in order to be approved.

Because it was so often used to show how folks were not measuring up to what they were supposed to be, and because this scripture was used to judge and control as a single woman, I responded to it very sarcastically.

Then I encountered Rachel Held Evans, and she wrote this book called *The Year of Biblical Womanhood*. Very deliciously funny and snarky and delightfully earnest all at the same time. And in this, she took on this chapter, Proverbs 31. And she shared that while working with some Jewish friends, they provided a different perspective on this scripture.

[ 2 : 41 ] That this scripture wasn't used to tell women what they should be, but rather it was used as a means to praise and honor women, calling women out as women of valor.

Imagine the transformation in me when I saw this in a new light. That this is not meant to be a box to contort yourself to fit in, but instead it's an honoring of who you are and who you are becoming.

And then, a couple years ago, I encountered Will Gaffney, who is a womanist theologian and Hebrew scholar. And she talked about this passage as well.

And shared that in the history of it, it was written by a strong woman queen, likely to her son, and that she was telling him the things he needed to look for to find the match for him.

The woman who, like her, was a warrior woman. And isn't it interesting that the deeper into context and understanding we go in a text, the more richer and fuller and nuanced and freeing that text gets.

[ 3 : 54 ] But isn't it also sad that we took something that was a message of love from a mother to a son, and then we turned that into a litany of shoulds that we demand all women strive to become.

Now, to me, the book of Romans has similar vibes. We read this book through the lens of our Western Christianity, and Romans makes sense to us if we see the gospel or the good news of Jesus as this, like, Eden was perfect, sin came, we fell, things have not been perfect, Jesus came with a way of redemption for us to go to heaven, or if we don't choose salvation, eternal torment. And if we have that lens and we look at the book of Romans, it looks like this linear progressive theological treatise, a list of things that we must do and be, and a condemnation of a whole bunch

of things that we shouldn't do.

And as Tonetta shared with us last week, this has been used in very damaging ways towards enslaved peoples, towards the LGBTQIA community. It's been used to control and condemn. But Romans has also been used to justify tearing churches and people in them apart. Lessons that we have taught from the book of Romans have often focused on expectations of faith, around sinful and sanctified behaviors, and in the emptying of ourselves and becoming vessels to God's plan.

[ 5 : 39 ] And while some of those things aren't necessarily bad, these lessons have been used to control and demand loyalty. And as biblical scholars Sylvia Kiesmat and Brian Walsh put it, Romans has become a litmus test of biblical orthodoxy, demarcating who's in and who is out.

And especially if our focus on the church centers in salvation for eternity and eternal expressions of faithfulness, then Romans is a handy book to use for control.

To be honest, really honest, Romans is nowhere near my favorite book of the Bible. So I think the challenge for me, and I think for all of us, is to figure out how to engage with this text in a way that doesn't hurt or divide or control, but instead find a way to see it bring togetherness and hope.

For me, this centers on three things. I need to understand the context in which this letter was written. I need to get a handle on what Paul was trying to accomplish.

And I need to lean into the liberative nature of the gospel and how that informs the vision that Paul had for this Roman church. So I'm going to spend a little bit of time talking context and a little bit of time talking about what Paul was going to do.

[ 7 : 11 ] And then we're going to get into Romans 12 itself. So this was written approximately a quarter century after the death of Christ. And Paul was working to help this experimental demonstration of living faith together, whether it storms.

And he was at a distance, so he was dictating this to a scribe. And he may be so wise and spirit-led, but we have to remember that this is a letter, not a summary of all his faith wisdom from over his entire lifetime, nor is it a dissertation or a thoroughly researched final project.

This is a letter from a passionate man, dictated to house churches, delivered and interpreted by a trusted friend. And it's genius in how it lays things out, but it's not entirely linear.

Paul keeps circling back to catch things and reimagine things. And he's talking about something he loves so much for people he cares about, but it's probably not been edited a lot.

If at all. He's sharing his feelings and he's sometimes being very honest. And I think Paul is a master in a long line of all of us that are flying by the seat of our pants with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

[ 8 : 35 ] Now, I think that may be a stretch for some of you to hear about the Apostle Paul. But to me, the point is that Paul is trying to build something that hasn't really been built before in this way.

And he's trying to build it on the foundation of the gospel of Jesus and trying in this long distance missive to address some very serious issues and to hold something together that is threatening to come apart.

And what were these issues? Tanetta outlined a little bit of this last time that the Jewish diaspora had been ejected from Rome and was now returning. And the Roman Christians, which were both Jews and Gentiles, were trying to navigate what does it mean to be a community of faith centered on Jesus that had both Gentiles and Jews who were doing a stellar job of judging each other.

And he was trying to figure out how this community should interact then with the empire around them, which was a big paradigm shift for a lot of them.

And Paul is trying to find a way to effectively navigate this new way based on the gospel of Jesus, uniting both parties or all the parties, especially in light of systems and tendencies to define faithfulness through traditional roles and expectations.

[ 10 : 00 ] Think whether or not you eat pork. Think whether or not you eat meat sacrificed to idols. Think circumcision, all of these fun things. How does the Roman church learn to follow the way of Jesus without being exclusionary or creating first and second class citizens?

And this is the big task that Paul has in his letter. And he starts it off by this. He identifies himself not as an elite, but as a slave and repeatedly ties himself to the gospel of Jesus, which begs the question, what is that gospel?

It's the good news from Jesus that the kingdom of God is at hand, or in other words, the just and loving way of God is here. Not just a possibility in the afterlife or the future, but it's waiting for us to repent or turn towards God and partner with God in the renewal of all things.

He's using this language of slavery and gospel to connect himself to the folks he's writing to. Folks for whom the empire has been one of control and domination and exile.

Slave and free, male and female, women are, Jew and Gentile and rich and poor are all in this Roman church looking for a place of belonging.

[ 11 : 22 ] And have begun to find that around the person of Jesus and the good news of the gospel, which is becoming counterculture to the empire around them. But they're struggling.

Struggling to create a place of belonging, a home together. So Paul's challenge is to unite this disparate group, to help them get on the same page, and to work together both against the idea of hope and peace that the empire is projecting that comes through violence and conformity and loyalty and obedience at the point of a sword.

And he needs to juxtapose the gospel of Jesus against these ideas of empire where home is created by exploiting people and military might.

He needs to redefine home and belonging for them. So he roots his letter in the good news of Jesus and connects himself with the exiles, not with the privileged and the citizens.

And then Paul is all kinds of clever. Taneta got into this quite a lot last time, and I highly recommend you go back and see it. But he uses people's stereotypes to call out the divisions between them and then show the communities in Rome that they are actually the things that they think divide them.

[ 12 : 41 ] Actually, they both use to miss the mark. And he demonstrates that even though the empire can cause a lot of havoc, we can too, especially in the ways we treat one another.

Honoring some over others, revering power and wealth, demanding observance of rituals. And Paul shows that belonging, while it can be rooted in rules and rituals, cannot be sustained just by observing them.

If you are going through the motions of the external rules, but your heart isn't rooted in covenant and love, then all the effort in the world won't bring belonging and home and unity and peace.

And Paul goes on to share that Jesus proclaimed the gospel that God's just and loving restoration and way of restoration and homecoming are at hand. But this isn't something that we can attain by hard work or doing all the right things, but it is a gift of grace.

The gift of grace that comes by the faithfulness of Jesus and is at hand for all who turn towards this grace, Jew or Gentile alike. Paul shares in this letter to the Roman Christians that this grace is both for the individual person and it's for the community.

[ 14 : 00 ] It's a place of belonging for the us individual and the we us together. Paul works to unite this community under the same story by showing there's a common struggle, a common way out, and that God is the God of all.

Which brings us to chapter 12. And chapter 12 is the heart of the conversation about the individual us and the we us together.

It sets up for the Roman Christians a way to work together and what the mission of this community is. And it starts with a very important word.

Therefore. Therefore. Therefore. That's why it's so important to try and understand what Paul is doing with the book of Romans, the letter to the Romans.

Because everything that follows the therefore is meant to rest on what came before. It's meant to be understood by communities of believers that struggled with us and them mentalities, that struggled under the heel of an oppressive empire, and that the faithfulness of God and the gospel of Jesus are the foundations for how we live together.

[ 15 : 19 ] And Paul is using this chapter to talk about how to move forward together in unity and each bringing their full selves to this whole.

So I'm going to start by reading from Romans 12. I'm using the NIV. There's some other translations that are great. I also find sometimes it's really good to read it in the message because it gives you a good handle on some of this.

We're going to start with this. Therefore. I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God.

This is your true and proper worship. Don't conform to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. And then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good and pleasing and perfect will.

For by the grace given me, I say to every one of you, don't think of yourselves more highly than you ought to, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment in accordance with the faith that God has

distributed to each of you.

[ 16 : 34 ] For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so we in Christ, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

In the beginning of this passage, Paul again levels the playing field. Therefore, because the grace and faithfulness of Jesus changes everything, because of the communal experience of God's mercy, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female, are all able to present themselves as a sacrifice.

And Paul is able to set a vision for the way that believers could live with each other and the world around them. And that starts with a sacrifice that, unlike the sacrifice in the Jewish temples that only Jews could participate in, this sacrifice was something that everybody could participate in.

And it was about bringing your body, and the word used here is soma, which is not so much just your physical body, but it's about your whole selves, your working and sleeping and eating and everyday selves, your dreams and visions, your playful and faithful selves.

It was about bringing it all. And the sacrifice isn't meant to be denying yourself and who you are just to make room for God. It is much more like choosing to live to or towards God and bringing your whole self into the sacred mission of God's just and loving way of life being lived out in the here and now.

[ 18 : 28 ] And it's about partnering with God in the restoration of all things and living out God's peace together. It's your whole self coming into God's presence.

Paul is encouraging these believers to allow being in God's presence and living in the Spirit to transform them. A transformation that is liberative from the chains of empire and into the healing and the hope that God brings.

And as this transformation happens, folks grow in discernment and renewal. Paul is really working hard to have the Roman Christians choose to be united.

Both Gentiles and Jews have reason to believe that they're chosen, but again, Paul comes back and tries to level things, reminding folks to use sober judgment rather than seeing themselves as better than others.

He's re-narrating the story of us and them into I'm the body of Christ. You, you, you, you are the body of Christ.

[ 19 : 41 ] We are the body of Christ. And what's really interesting is the language Paul uses. He uses this word soma for body.

And in the Greek and Roman circles, this was used for the body politic, the city or the realm of the empire. So when Paul is using this word to talk about the body of people and the local house churches, he's setting up a vision of the church being counterculture to empire, where the church, the gathering of the people, the community, the body, the soma, where people are fully embodied, spirit-powered representatives of Jesus.

He's stating that this can't be done alone, but they need to do this all together. As theologian Scott McKnight puts it, the goal is to embody the sacrifice to become God's design for humans in the world.

Apart from the spirit, these churches would spend all their energies judging who has privilege and who has power, but with the spirit together, they can find a way to live in community and find a peace greater than anything Rome has to offer.

In Romans 12, Paul goes on to describe what life should be like together, how each can bring their gifts and share them in service together.

[ 21 : 16 ] He goes on in Romans 12 to say this, Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil and cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love.

Honor one another above your own selves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. And he takes it up a notch. Bless those who persecute you.

Bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don't be conceited. Don't repay evil with evil. Be careful what you do is right in the eyes of everyone.

[ 22 : 22 ] If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath.

For it is written, It is mine to avenge. I will repay, says the Lord. On the contrary, Then he quotes this little poem. If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heat burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

I feel like so much of that has been used in one way or another to tell me how I'm supposed to live my life. Very prescriptive behavior.

But I want to take us back in here out of that prescriptive mindset to see what Paul is doing with the church here. Paul is calling these Roman Christians to practice the way of love.

[ 23 : 21 ] Choosing to be generous with one another and to share in the everyday journey with their siblings in the faith. He's asking them to be the body of Christ to one another and with one another.

To share and hold each other up. To provide for each other's needs. To enable each other to use their gifts as they have been given. And then he turns their gaze outwards and calls them to a way of living that is the antithesis of the empire in which they are.

To find a way to live God's peace in an empire that is not for them. And to walk away from the trappings of power and violence. This is a call to examine how they live towards each other and how they live towards those outside of their community of faith.

And to practically live the way of Christ in the midst of uncertainty and instability. So how do you respond to those who threaten your safety and security?

Feed them, says Paul. Bless them, says Paul. How do you counter the us-them mentality that has been pervasive? Honor others.

[ 24 : 37 ] Don't be proud or conceited. How do you counter fear or suspicion? Practice hospitality. Live joyfully in hope.

Paul is urging the Roman Christians to root their belonging and their home in who God is and to practice God's peace.

He's saying, you, you all, this Soma are the home of God. So cling to what is good.

Do everything with love. And overcome evil with good and live the love that has been given to you.

One of my favorite verses in Romans isn't in this chapter.

It's in Romans 8. And it talks about how all creation is groaning as if in childbirth, waiting for the children of God to be revealed. And I think Romans 12 is Paul telling this community of believers how to be revealed as children of God.

[ 25 : 44 ] I think it's important for us to think about how we can work this in and through who we're becoming as well. Not as a prescription of you must do these things, but in light of who God is and the good news of Jesus, that God's just and loving world is at hand, we have an opportunity to turn towards Christ and join in the mission of restoration of all things and in living the peace of God in our working, our sleeping, our eating, and our everyday lives.

This turning of our whole selves, this sacrifice, is not just an individual act. It's for my whole self. And your whole self.

And your whole self. And your whole self. And our whole selves coming together as a community for this mission. And it's in this way that we're transformed so that we can discern and act and choose to be moving towards healing and hope.

Not just individually, but as a whole community. And it's in this place of communal transformation and discernment that we can begin to ask.

Where has the empire of the day taken root in our lives? Where do we need to find the way of God again? And how can I be living the good news towards myself and towards those in my community?

[ 27 : 25 ] as we lean into this chapter, it's less about following Paul's commands to the letter and much more about us looking deeply at what he's trying to build and who he's trying to root that on.

A community of unity and peace, counterculture to the empire of the day that controls and oppresses, but instead is rooted in the gospel of Jesus.

Jesus. And this is what I believe we're called to emulate. To imagine and discern a way to live this in community together.

Let's pray. Lord, we pray that we could find ways always and every day to join in the great mission that you have.

to see your kingdom, your just and loving way of living be here and now, not just in the future, in heaven.

[ 28 : 28 ] Lord, help us find a way to join in with you and as a community to come together and choose to be your sacrifice, turn towards you and learn from you and discern what is the way that we need to walk.

We pray that you and your spirit would transform us and continue to build unity and continue to bring wholeness to all of us. We pray this in your name.  
Amen.