

BELONG

We seem to get bombarded with 'healthy lifestyle' messages: "quit sugar", "be physically active", "eat more vegetables" ... and the list goes on. Then, periodically, there are reminders in the mail, that it is time to participate in different types of government-funded health screening. A number of people are ambivalent about these tests, especially as they pose some risky questions for us: How healthy – really – is my body? And, what will I have to do about it – if there's a problem with my test results?

In Rom 12:5, the apostle Paul wrote that "we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." Paul also used this 'body' analogy in 1 Cor 12. In Romans 12, though, Paul bombards us with messages about healthy habits for Christian communities. The questions that I want you to keep in the back of your mind, as you work through this study are:

- How healthy – really – is the local 'body' of Christ that I'm part of? (whether that be my life group, ministry group or church as a whole); and
- What will I have to do about it – if there's a problem that we identify as part of this discussion?

PRAY: That God will challenge each member of your group, to take away one thing and a conviction to do something about it, to build up and encourage the (local) body of Christ.

READ: Romans 12:1-21

As I read this passage, I was struck by how Paul was concerned for the health of the Christian community in Rome. This was a church dealing with persecution, but they still met regularly as house churches. Romans 12 starts with Paul challenging us to have lives that are totally consecrated to God; our physical bodies are to be living sacrifices to God. Our mindset and way of thinking must be transformed, so that we make intentional decisions to live in a way that pleases God. Individually and corporately, we should "not be conformed to this world". Our individual and communal lives should stand out from the norm.

- What things characterise a 'great' life group? Is it the fellowship? The food? The bible study? Being able to support each other and be supported through the tough times of life? What else?
- As a group, do you intentionally create opportunities for fellowship through the year and to build community? (eg a bbq or dinner once a term?) Is there someone in your group who has a passion for fellowship and hospitality, who would be willing to co-ordinate these events?

Last week, we looked at the idea that we are the family/ household of God. As 'family', we have relational ties to each other. Then, in Rom 12:4-5, we read "so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another". Body parts are connected in many ways: eg by flesh and blood, veins and arteries, muscles and ligaments. The same blood runs through our veins.

- One reason that people leave and/ or change churches is because of the lack of 'connection' with other people. What things do you do, to ensure everyone in your group feels included/ connected?
- Alternatively, some church people may be overly intrusive, including being judgemental about lifestyle decisions. Cloud and Townsend have written extensively on the issue of 'Boundaries' in relationships. How can we strike a balance between 'connection' and 'boundaries'?

In 1 Cor 12, Paul also used the 'church as body' analogy and wrote:

"God has so arranged the body, ... that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it." (1 Cor 12:24-26)

Paul didn't anticipate that there would be a special pastoral care person to care for everyone. Rather, the body is expected to rally around a member who is suffering and to celebrate with someone who is rejoicing.

- How, as a group, do you 'do' celebrations?
- Have you thought through a pastoral care strategy in your group? Do you rely on each other for support – or at least have one other person you can call on when there's a crisis or you need help?

- In Rom 12:6-8, Paul lists the following seven gifts: prophesying, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leading, showing mercy. Which of these gifts do you see evident in different people in your group?

Despite the NIV translation inserting the words “if a man’s gift”, these verses are not ‘gender bound’. The letter says that we are all given grace/ gifts in proportion to our faith and need to be faithful in using these gifts. These instructions are given, regardless of our gender.

- Do you have any qualms about women being involved in teaching or leading in your group? If this is an issue, take time to have a discussion about how to resolve the concerns people have.

In Romans 12:9-21, Paul gets really practical. In NRSV, the heading is ‘Marks of the True Christian’. Douglas Moo comments that the book of Romans is “one of the most theological books in the Bible” and people wonder why Paul “bothers with all the practical stuff at the end of the letter.” In Rom 12:1-2, we’re told that we need to learn to discern God’s will in our lives, wherever we are and in whatever we’re doing: “All theology is practical, and all practice, if it is truly Christian, is theological. Paul’s gospel is deeply theological, but it is also eminently practical. The good news of Jesus Christ is intended to transform a person’s life. Until individual Christians own and live out the theology, the gospel has not accomplished its purpose.”¹

Paul writes “Let your love be genuine/ sincere”. Then, in verse 10, he uses two words that relate to familial relationships: having “brotherly love” (*philadelphia*) and be “devoted” to one another (*philostorgoi*).

- Read Rom 12:6-16 again.
 - What things do we learn about the nature of genuine/ sincere love for each other?
 - What things do we learn about genuine/ sincere discipleship?
 - What things do we learn about genuine/ sincere ministry and service?
- Read Acts 2:42-47. What are the similarities between the community life of the early church in Acts 2 and the instructions given by Paul in Rom 12:9-13?

In a healthy body, all the parts work together. However, we know that there are many types of auto-immune diseases (including chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple sclerosis, Type 1 diabetes and coeliac disease - to name but a few). “Normally, our immune system protects our body and works to keep us healthy: it helps resist infection. ... An autoimmune disease occurs when the body's immune system is chronically overactive and attacks healthy cells.”² i.e. one part of the body starts fighting other parts of itself, causing pain and ‘dis-ease’ for the whole body.

- In Rom 12:9-21, what instructions does Paul give, so that members of the body don’t start attacking each other and cause damage to the ‘body’?
- What mindset and attitudes do we need to have (esp when we feel we are under threat)? How is that different to the prevailing attitude in our culture and how does that reflect Jesus’ teaching?

Scripture provides us with reminders that we are not designed to do life as ‘loners’. In Gen 2:18, “the LORD God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” In Eccles 4:9-12 we read of the value of a friend: “Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. ... And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.”

REFLECT, SHARE & PRAY: In his review of the film ‘Christopher Robin’, Paul Asay writes: “When we are alone, we lose ourselves. It takes others to help remind us who we really are, and who we should be.”³ We need to keep reminding each other that we are all dearly loved children of God and are valuable members of the body of Christ. We need to remind each other to reflect his likeness. What, as a group, can we do better – to be more tangibly ‘God’s family’ and the ‘body of Christ’ - together?

¹ Moo, D. J. (2000). *Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House. p393.

² Garvin Institute for Medical Research. “Autoimmune Disease Explained”. https://www.garvin.org.au/research/collaborative-programs/hope/autoimmune-disease?qclid=EAlalQobChMI-LvKqbXL3AIVQaSWCh3X5A1zEAAAYASAAEgKeQ_D_BwE

³ Asay, P. (August 2, 2018) “Four Great Lessons from Christopher Robin (With a Spiritual Twist)” http://www.patheos.com/blogs/watchinggodd/2018/08/four-great-lessons-from-christopher-robin-with-a-spiritual-twist/#disqus_thread