

The Jesus Difference

Romans 12:13-16

Introduction

Justin Brierly comments on the way Christianity has influenced culture in the Western world

Justin Brierly: 'The belief that all people should be treated with inherent dignity and equality of status regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, economic status, or any other characteristic is so taken for granted by most people in the modern West that we barely question it. Yet to the majority of previous civilizations, it would have been regarded as bizarre in the extreme.'

Of course, this view – ultimately flows from the biblical teaching that man has been made in the image of God

Tom Holland is an author who began to study the Greco-Roman world - and it led him to appreciate the striking changes which Christianity introduced into the world

One area of contrast was in the sexual relationship

In the Roman world – women were expected to be faithful to their husbands - - - but the men were allowed to visit prostitutes / have concubines and slaves for whatever they pleased – and slaves had no rights or expectation of consent in any of these matters

The view of Athens

Demosthenes [343 B.C.]: "We have courtesans [prostitutes] for the sake of pleasure, and concubines for the daily care of our persons, but wives for the sake of having children legitimately and of being faithful guardians of our households."

It was a double standard

Justin Brierly: 'Many modern eyes have looked back on Paul's insistence on chastity, monogamy, and the longstanding Christian sexual ethic it birthed as repressive and puritanical. But set in the context of ancient Rome, it was a rule of life that offered dignity and stability both to women and to slaves.'

Christianity also brought change into the world for how people treated the weak and unwanted

Rodney Stark states that the 'exposure' of unwanted female infants and deformed male infants was legal, morally accepted, and widely practiced by all social classes in the Greco-Roman world . . . even in large families – more than one daughter was practically never raised.

'Exposure' was a form of infanticide – simply leaving a baby outside to starve or be eaten by wild animals / or picked up by slave traders

A letter from a Roman soldier to his pregnant wife gives a sense of the low view of life that prevailed

"I am still in Alexandria . . . take care of our little child, and as soon as we receive wages, I will send them to you. In the meantime, if you give birth, if it is a boy, let it live, if it is a girl, expose it.'

So – what changed between now and then?

In a word – Christianity

Justin Brierly: 'When we exalt humility and compassion, or champion the equality and dignity of every human being, we are walking in the footsteps of Jesus.'

These traits were not the instincts of ancient civilizations – but were particularly Christian and contingent upon the Christian story of reality

As we consider these next several imperatives in Romans 12 we are reminded of how the Christian was to differ from the culture around him [Rom. 12:2]

This is the Jesus difference - - - As Christians follow our Lord and Savior - - - we not only bear witness to our redemption – but display the contrast between the old way of living in the grips of Satan - - - contrasted with our new life in Christ

I. A Generous Heart - v. 13

Paul began this section with the love command - - - some of these exhortations are simply the outworking of that love – showing love to others

Contributing = κοινωνία – to share in [fellowship]

We enter into a kind of fellowship with those whose needs we help to provide

We allow their burden to be shared with us

We are stewards of what God has entrusted to us / given to us

Jesus encourages our generosity – reminding us that as we pour out our resources on others - - it will be returned unto us in some fashion

Luke 6:38 - 'Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, they will pour into your lap. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.'

Generosity is a mark of discipleship – showing that we share heaven's values

C.S. Lewis – when he began giving his broadcast talks over BBC radio during WW II – asked that his fees be distributed to widows and orphans – something he had already started doing from his Screwtape Letters appearing weekly in the Guardian

The Apostle Paul – in the epistles we see that he was taking up a collection for the poor saints in Jerusalem - He referred to the generosity of the Macedonians [Philippi]

II Corinthians 8:4 - '[The Macedonians] begged us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints.'

"Stone Soup" is a European folk story in which hungry strangers convince the people of a town to each share a small amount of their food in order to make a meal.

As the story goes - weary travelers arrive at a small village – and all the townspeople see their arrival and hide their goods and food – shut themselves inside their homes

The travelers set up a fire on the town square and put on it a pot of water – and place within the pot – a large stone. Pretty soon a villager happens by and asks what is in the pot. They explain – 'we are making stone soup' – it's pretty good stuff - - - You may have some if you like but it could use a few more ingredients - - - so the man returns home and grabs a few carrots to throw into the pot. Then another neighbor comes by and throws in some cabbage/ another comes by with some peas - - - another with some beans - - - and pretty soon the pot is so full – they remove the stone and all sit down to enjoy their tasty soup

While we appreciate the story – we recognize that the people had to be sort of tricked into sharing what they had - - - that's what is natural – to fallen humanity

Christianity is different

Jerry Bridges: 'We are not naturally inclined to take from our pockets to meet the needs of others. But God's grace can transform us from selfish graspers to generous sharers, and this transforming grace of God at work in us brings glory to Him.'

Randy Alcorn uses this analogy when he talks about how the Christian can lay up treasure in heaven

Randy Alcorn: 'Imagine you're alive at the end of the Civil War. You're living in the South but you are a northerner. You plan to move home as soon as the war is over. While in the

South you've accumulated lots of confederate currency. Now – suppose you know for a fact that the North is going to win the war and the end is imminent. What will you do with your money?

'If you're smart – there's only one answer. You should immediately cash in your Confederate currency for US currency – the only money that will have value once the war is over. Keep only enough Confederate currency to meet your short-term needs.' [Money, Possessions, and Eternity, p. 100]

That is what you and I do when we give to kingdom causes – support missions – give to the needy – support a gospel ministry

One day this war is going to be over - - - Satan's day are numbered

We are simply trading in our confederate money for that which is true

Our giving is to support the truly needy – and not as an encouragement to idleness / sinful living

Paul also told the Thessalonians – 'If a man will not work – neither let him eat.'

Pursue hospitality - - - seek opportunities

Hebrews 13:1, 2 - 'Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.'

Lot took in the angels who came to visit Sodom – Gen. 19 – and they led him out of Sodom! / saved his life

R.C. Chapman: 'The New Testament's injunctions to hospitality are all given in the context of love.'

Hospitality is a practical expression of love for other believers

Alexander Strauch shares of how a LA Times writer once visited churches to see how friendly and loving they were. He rated his visitation experience with a point system

Greeters at the door – 2 points

Some kind of letter or follow-up card from the church after the visit – 3 points

Coffee hour – 5 points

Someone introducing themselves in a cordial, non-threatening manner – 10 points

Personal invitation to dinner – 60 points!

You can see what he liked!

Alexander Strauch: 'I often hear people say, 'Oh - we just don't know anyone; we can't make any friends at church.' I have a suggestion that might solve the problem. It comes from a couple who had a hard time feeling as if they belonged in their congregation. Instead of leaving, as so many people do, they decided to invite every person in the church to their home for dinner during the next year. By the end of the year, they knew every one in the church and had made a number of close friendships!'

Hospitality – throws the log on the fire / warms the church's relationships

One of the popular sitcoms back in the eighties was the show Cheers – with Sam Malone / Norm / Cliff / Woody / Frazier

The opening song – invites you in [catchy little tune]

'Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name – and they're always glad you came.'

Who wouldn't want that?

It would be a better description of a church than a bar – because we are the family of God

A bar is a cheap imitation - - you have to be buzzed to enter in to the fellowship

Ephesians 5:18 - 'And be not get drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.' [kjv]

When the church is filled with the Spirit – there is nothing that can compete with Christian fellowship

II. Blessing Your Enemies - v. 14

People sometimes bring faulty expectations to the Christian faith

If I trust in Christ – nothing bad will ever happen to me

I will not ever be a victim of a crime

I will have no enemies – everyone will love me!

I will not suffer for the Christian faith

I will not get cancer / etc.

But – all of those expectations are simply wrong

God promises that nothing occurs in our lives which He will not somehow bring redemptive good from in this life – or have it completely eclipsed in the afterlife by the glory revealed to us [Rom. 8:28 / 8:18]

Luke 6:27-28 - 'But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.'

Bless = εὐλογεῖν – to speak well of

Treat your enemies as though they were your friends

John MacArthur's nephew was murdered by someone who was trying to get drug money from him

John's brother-in-law – who was deeply grieved at their own loss – refused to become bitter – and went and shared the gospel of Christ with the man in prison - who took his own son's life

We might think of Jesus – having just been nailed to the cross of Calvary – where He would die

Luke 23:34 - 'But Jesus was saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

I Peter 3:9 - 'Not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.'

This is probably one of the most difficult of all NT commands – to act out of benevolence or good will toward those who injure us or persecute us / act as an enemy in some way

Restraint is a mark of Christian maturity

Mitch Albom in his book – 'Tuesdays with Morrie' - describes some *life lessons* he learned from meeting with a former professor who was dying of ALS – or Lou Gehrig's Disease

One day Morrie – the old professor - talked about how people are in such a hurry in this world

Morrie observed: 'People haven't found meaning in their lives, so they're running all the time looking for it. They think the next car, the next house, the next job. Then they find those things are empty too and they keep running.'

Mitch: 'Once you start running – it's hard to slow yourself down'

‘Not so hard’ – says Morrie

Morrie: ‘Do you know what I do when someone wants to get ahead of me in traffic – when I used to be able to drive – I would raise my hand . . .’

He tried to do this now – but the hand lifted weakly only six inches.

‘. . . I would raise my hand, as if I were going to make a negative gesture, and then I would wave and smile. Instead of giving them the finger, you let them go – and you smile.’

‘You know what? A lot of times they smiled back.’ [Tuesdays with Morrie, pp. 136-7]

That’s it – give a blessing / instead of cursing

III. The Empathy of Love - v. 15

To rejoice and be glad at the good fortune of others

To be sensitive to the hardships and sorrows of others

Professor John Somerville at the University of Florida liked to give his students an exercise – that shows different cultural values

Imagine you see a little old lady coming down the street at night, and she’s carrying a purse. And it suddenly occurs to you that it would be incredibly easy to just knock her over and grab her purse. But you don’t. Why not?

He suggests two possible answers:

The first answer is that of the **shame-honor culture**

This response is – you wouldn’t do it because it would make you a bad person, unworthy of respect. It would dishonor your family or your tribe to act in such a way

Professor Somerville would point out that this answer is almost entirely self-oriented – you are thinking of yourself / your reputation etc.

The Second option as to why you wouldn’t steal the old ladies purse is that you empathize with the woman – you think of how much grief and pain it would cause her to be knocked to the ground and to have her purse snatched. You think about how she might need that money – and what would happen to the people who depend on her. i.e. – you wouldn’t want someone to do this to your grandma / etc.

Professor Somerville calls this an ‘other regarding ethic’ – you are thinking of the other person

He says that this motive generally surfaces only in cultures that have been exposed to Christianity

The '**shame - honor**' culture is far more common among non-Christian cultures [Islamic]

The '**other regarding**' ethic is more common among Christian cultures [it is essentially the Golden Rule] // [Matt. 7:12]

True empathy – can prevent a lot of sin – and guide us into loving behavior

When plagues struck the Mediterranean world in the first and second centuries – the upper classes fled for the safety of the countryside - - but in contrast – many Christians headed in the opposite direction – into the cities to care for the sick.

N.T. Wright: 'People looked at these funny Christians . . . and they said, "why did you do that? Why did you come and nurse us? We're not your family. We're not your tribe. And the Christian would respond, "It's because we follow this man called Jesus, who went about doing good and touching lepers and touching corpses and risking uncleanness in order to bring health.' [p. 87]

Jesus wept at the grave of Lazarus – and He also celebrated at the wedding in Cana

IV. The Humility of Love - v. 16

Don't be high minded towards the Jews or the Gentiles

Human pride leads to vanity / snobbery / conceit

This was how Jesus approached people

Jesus spoke to all kinds – and took all comers – why?

Because each individual possessed value as a soul with an eternal destiny

John MacArthur: 'It made no difference to Jesus whether the one to whom He spoke or ministered was a wealthy Jewish leader or a common beggar, a virtuous woman or a prostitute, a high priest or a common worshiper, handsome or ugly, educated or ignorant, religious or irreligious, law-abiding citizen or criminal. His overriding concern was the condition of the soul.'

Daniel Doriani: 'If there is one community in this world where all should get equal treatment, it is the church. The ground is level at the foot of the cross.'

James 2:1-4 - 'My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil motives?'

Here comes the poor – stinky man into church - - - nobody greets him / he looks like he hasn't showered in days - - - we don't want to sit by him

Here comes Richard moneybags - - - Oh – come sit up here – in a nice place

James says – don't do that

Because each individual is a living soul before God – and has an eternal destiny based on what they do with Jesus Christ

Conclusion

Corrie Ten Boom – towards the end of her time at the Ravensbruck concentration camp – she was sent to the camp hospital – because they didn't want to release anyone with any kind of illness

The misery and gloom of the place was overwhelming. During her first night – three patients had fallen from their beds and died on the floor. Many were yelling for someone to bring a bed pan because they were too weak or injured to walk themselves to the bathroom.

The second night Corrie decided to take up the bed pan chore – since nobody else seemed to care

She helped a woman who had to lie on her stomach because part of her back and leg had been shot away. Corrie encouraged her gently and she responded: 'Who are you? You are a good woman. There are only evil women here. Where did you come from?'

Corrie: 'Just because I treated her with common decency – I was an exception.'

That's the difference Jesus makes!

As we follow Jesus - - - we ought to seek a similar response:

'Where did you come from?' / this world is filled with evil - - - but you are different - - - tell me about this Jesus you believe in.