

# 14

## *Relating To God By Trust*

We have seen that the principle of relating to God, for all people at all times throughout His dealings with human beings, is *trust*. Having heard God's Word in their time, each person is required to actively rely on that Word. This was as true for Adam, Moses, David and Isaiah as it is for us. Wherever we are on the line of God's dealings, this is the vital response.

In Chapter 8 we saw that Paul spends the whole of Romans 4 spelling this out in the life of Abraham. Paul needs to emphasize this principle of trust because he is preaching that a person can receive righteousness from God solely on the basis that Christ has died. His opponents attacked this idea, claiming it overthrows the Law. Paul, like his Master before Him (Mt 5:17-20), makes it clear he is not attempting to abolish the Law, but to show that the response of faith in God's Word is relationally more fundamental, and is what God requires.

Indeed, trust is so fundamental in relating to God that in Romans 14 Paul indicates we are to care for one another according to whether our faith is weak or strong (I call this our 'faith stance'). He even says that anything in our life

which does not proceed from faith is sin (v 23). This is very significant. The Pharisees, taking their starting place from Point 3 in our diagram, defined sin as transgression of the Law, which is right as far as it goes. But Paul moves into the *inner* life of man, showing that what determines if a man is sinning or not is whether he is relying on the Lord for what he is doing.

Let's look at how Paul develops this theme in the course of his letter.

### TRUSTING GOD TO BE RIGHT WITH HIM

First, we must trust God in order to be made right with Him in the first place.

In Romans 1, Paul tells us that God's wrath is coming on all those who hold back the truth about Him and cease to acknowledge Him as the One who is to be appreciated and thanked for all of life (vv 18–21). The reason the gospel is good news is that it speaks of the righteousness God has provided as a gift in the midst of rebellion (vv 16–17). This gift is appropriated when a man or woman trusts God for it.

This is spelled out strongly in Romans 3:19–31. It is possible, says Paul, to be accounted righteous on the basis that Christ has died on our behalf. He has been set forth by God as the propitiation (full payment) for our sins. What we are required to do is trust God's Word about this work of Christ on our behalf. When we believe this, we experience right standing with God, because we are trusting what He has said about how He sees us.

This justification does not come through a person's active works of law-keeping. It is 'apart from law' (v 21)—not in the sense that the Law is annulled (it is still useful to show us our sin) but that it is not the means by which we are saved, because by ourselves we cannot keep it. Rather, we are justified on the grounds of Christ's work for us and God's declaration that this is effective. This is His gift, and we are called to trust it.

So first of all we trust what God says in order to be in a right standing with Him. That is what He asks of us in our relation with Him.

## TRUSTING GOD FOR VICTORY OVER SIN

Having stated that this principle of faith is as old as Abraham, and that therefore his Jewish critics are wrong to say it is not the way to live (Rom 4), Paul goes on to argue that our justification and consequent peace with God has implications for the way we live (Rom 5—6). Because we have been baptized into Christ, our 'Federal Man', we have died to sin and are to look for a new life (Rom 6). This new life means victory over sin in our flesh now and the resurrection of our body when Jesus returns (Rom 7—8).

This newness is first a matter of recognizing that an active power called 'sin' still resides in our body. We are indwelt by a power which fights against the work of the Holy Spirit, who is also in us. But the Spirit is in union with our 'spirit' (1 Cor 6:17); so although the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is alive because of the righteousness we have been given as a gift (Rom 8:10).

So while sin is still resident in us, it can (and must) be defeated. And the way we defeat it is by *trusting* in the active presence of the Holy Spirit in us (Rom 8:11). We are to:

- *Decide* for the things of the Spirit—'set our mind' on them (Rom 8:5—8). To walk according to the Spirit simply means to decide for those matters the Spirit indicates.
- *Trust* the Spirit to 'put to death' the deeds of our body. These deeds are dominated by sin, the active power resident there. This negative work of killing is done by the Holy Spirit's power, but we must trust Him for it.

When we decide and trust in this way, then we live (Rom 8:13). Decisions which arise from our free will, allied to faith in the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, are the way to

have victory over the power of sin—and consequently to experience, moment-by-moment, newness of life.

Therefore just as we are to trust the work of Christ to bring us into right standing with God in the first place, so we are to trust the work of the Spirit of Christ, who lives in us, to experience newness of life.

This is the vital truth of 'living by faith' in the present. We have been called to live a godly life; but this life is literally *not livable* without constant, moment-by-moment faith in the Holy Spirit. Once again, this is consistent with the whole experience of the Old Testament saints. We are to trust God's Word today about how to live in a way which brings Him glory in our age.

### TRUSTING GOD FOR A RENEWED MIND

In Romans 1, Paul states that the wrath of God comes on people because they suppress (by an act of will) what they know of God (v 18). He says this suppression is done 'by their wickedness', and he supports that assertion by showing that people really *do* know something about God and so have no excuse when they reject the truth (vv 19–20). They know God, in the sense that they perceive some of the evidences for Him in His works and have a witness about Him within themselves; but they do not give Him the appropriate response of honour and thanksgiving.

This wilful act of suppression has serious results. Futility sets in to their thinking, their hearts are darkened and their bodies are given over to their 'sinful desires' to be degraded (vv 21, 24). Paul further describes their minds as being 'depraved' (v 28)—the translation of a Greek word which conveys the idea of an *untesting* mind. In other words, the mind of the rebel is affected in such a way that it loses its ability to discriminate issues of life.

It is small wonder, then, when discussing the change which takes place for the Christian, that Paul speaks of the work of God on the mind.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—which is your spiritual worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom 12:1–2).

Paul first urges us to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God because this is our 'spiritual worship'. The Greek word translated 'spiritual' carries the idea of 'reasonable'; this is a rational act of worship. It flows from the idea already developed in Romans 8:5–8—it is an act of will that has to do with 'setting the mind' on the things of the Spirit.

This worship involves 'not conforming' to the ways of the rebellious world around us. In Greek, the verb here is active: we are to actively set our mind against allowing the world to mould our life. But when we are told to 'be transformed', the verb is passive—that is, it is something done to us. God transforms us. And the means He uses to bring about this transformation is *the renewing of our mind*. We need to trust Him to continually be doing this. It is, like everything else in the Christian life, a matter of faith.

The reason God wants our mind renewed is so that we can 'test' what His will is. 'Testing' in Greek is a word derived from the picture of heating precious metals to separate the dross from the pure ore. To test thus means to discriminate between competing impressions so that among them we can discern the will of God—that is, what is good, pleasing and perfect. This is important, because although God guides us infallibly, we do not receive His infallible guidance infallibly! We must test it, not to 'approve' it in the sense of deciding whether or not we like it, but in the sense of making sure we have heard Him correctly. We do not use our mind to *sense* the leading of God which comes from the anointing of the Holy Spirit in us; this sensing is a function of our spirit. But

we use our renewed mind to test what we sense—that is, to check and discriminate whether it is the will of God.

So once again, we are asked to trust God for something: to renew our mind. We need to believe He is doing this. Our discrimination as Christians is not something of our own 'fleshy' mental drive but a calm reliance on God transforming us so that we can mentally check things out, discriminate between good and bad, and discern things which once, because of our rebellion, we could not discern.

If you want to be encouraged about this, it is necessary only to remember what a change has been brought to your discrimination in many matters since you became a Christian.

## **ACTION**

1 Make certain that you have decided, as a definite act of will, to not conform to the world. State this to the Lord. Renounce matters where you have conformed in the past.

2 Decide to trust Him for the transformation of your life, and expect that transformation to manifest in the arena of the mind. Expect increased discernment and clarity about all matters.

## **TRUSTING GOD IN MINISTRY TO ONE ANOTHER**

Given this emphasis on faith, it is not surprising to discover that serving one another in the body of Christ must be done by faith as well. We must not serve each other 'according to the flesh'.

In Romans 12, Paul next introduces the idea that within the body of Christ we must have a right view of ourselves (v 3). We need a 'sober judgement' so that we do not think more highly of ourselves than we ought. This sober judgement has to do with understanding how the Lord has allotted to each of us a 'measure of faith' (in this context, faith for ministry). In other words, Paul is urging us to assess ourselves on the basis

of what we can trust God to use us to do among our fellow Christians.

That is the first move in ministry: to understand our measure of faith. The second is to be aware that God makes available to us different charismatic gifts (vv 4–6). Paul's list here includes prophecy, serving, teaching, encouraging, contributing to the needs of others, leadership and showing mercy. In 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 he has another list. These gifts are God's equipment for us to minister to one another. He gives them moment-by-moment as we trust Him for them.

What it is crucial to see is that if we attempt to serve one another without faith in God for these gifts we will sin. This is tremendously important. Not everyone acknowledges that such gifts are for today. But to deny this is to deny the way of life Paul is articulating. His teaching is that we must *always* live by faith, in everything. God's salvation is 'by faith from first to last' (Rom 1:17). This is Paul's principle. In the field of ministry, it means that wherever people trust God for these gifts, they will exercise them, in that moment, for the service of their brothers and sisters.

Among God's people, then, every work of the Holy Spirit in ministry must happen by charismatic gifts. This is the only way the Spirit's work can be done; God has no other plan for ministry. Ministry done in any other way is done 'in the flesh', and is actually not ministry at all. Only service which looks to God to be present and working in the way He wishes will have the results God desires.

This is why it is vital that we understand the principle of living by faith encompasses the whole of life. We are justified by faith; we have victory over sin by faith; we serve one another with charismatic gifts by faith. And there is one more thing Paul insists we trust God for in our life together: the discernment we need to care for one another in the area of ethical decision-making.

## FAITH AND ETHICAL LIVING

In Romans 14, Paul tackles something fundamental to the life of Christians in community: the issue of disagreements over acceptable Christian behaviour.

He understands that whenever someone comes into the body of Christ from the clutches of Satan (and who does not?), he comes with his will committed to act on the basis of what he did before his rescue. Many of our presuppositions reflect the deceptions foisted on us in the past by the enemy—deceptions we have accepted and acted on, and thus given our will to.

These sinful commitments of will determine the way we perceive many things in the Christian life. Part of our journey into freedom involves identifying them, repenting of them and joyfully seeing God uproot them. But He does not change everything about us at once; He makes our faith grow over time. What happens, then, when a number of Christians, all carrying such wilful commitments, try to live together? We find that the faith of some is strong to believe certain things and act on them, but the faith of others is weak. Consequently, disagreements emerge between one person and the next about what is acceptable behaviour for a child of God. Paul's concern is to develop a way we can care for one another while recognizing the fact that each Christian is at a different stage in his faith stance.

So, for example, a man might come into the Christian body as a convinced vegetarian (v 2). Paul says it is not right to argue with him about this 'disputable matter' for he is someone 'whose faith is weak' (v 1). In other words, he has not yet come to the point where he trusts God that it is all right for him to eat food other than vegetables. In this sense, his Christian liberty is not fully expressed in the dietary area. But Paul insists that correcting this is not just a matter of teaching him. His faith must grow too.

The starting point for relating to such a man is that the Lord has accepted him; therefore, there is no reason for



anyone among the brothers and sisters not to do so. The basis for all relationships in the body of Christ is that each Christian has experienced the acceptance of the Lord in justification. If a man trusts God for right standing before Him on the basis of Jesus' work on the cross, then he is acceptable to God; with God's help and call, he has (as it were) opened his 'faith account'. Each of us is at that place.

Paul indicates that Christian maturity is tied to how much we trust God for the things He has revealed. The more mature Christian has relied on what God has made known in more places than the new Christian. Consequently, Paul says, it is the responsibility of the person whose faith is strong to care for the one whose faith is weak (he makes the same point in 1 Corinthians 7). The new Christian thinks he may eat only vegetables; the mature Christian knows this is not true. But he must not force the vegetarian to eat meat because that would push him beyond his present faith stance. It is not our work to dispute a brother's opinion or draw him into action which his faith does not currently allow. We would only cause him to stumble (vv 13-15).

The vital issue here is the position of my brother's faith. If he cannot trust God for this or that, we are not to dispute with him. Rather, we are to care for him and refuse to draw him into sin by forcing him to move beyond his faith. This does not mean, of course, that we do not teach him more about his liberty in Christ and encourage him to exercise it. But we are careful of his faith where it is weak.

So our ethical understanding within the body is very much tied to where each person's faith is. All people are on a faith journey, and it is important not to draw them beyond the level of their trust in God, either by tempting them to do what is wrong, or by drawing them into activity which is godly but only for those who trust God rightly about it. To do this would be to force them to act without faith, and hence cause them to sin—for 'everything that does not come from faith is sin' (v 23).

## ACTION

1 This has enormous implications for the advice and counsel we give. We should not be content to teach and then encourage a person to do what is taught without an eye for what he believes and can trust God for.

2 Notice, then, that our business is not to control others' lives but to see what Father has taught them to trust Him for, and then to encourage them to press on.

## FAITHFUL LIVING IS RIGHT LIVING

The letter to the Romans teaches us that from the beginning of the Christian life to the end we will always be trusting. Further, our faith will always be growing and changing. As we see more and more of the liberty God has in store for us, so we will trust more and more. Our faith grows the older we get.

Or it should. Sadly, it is often the reverse. The older we get, the more conservative and less risk-taking our faith becomes. We accept God's Word less plainly and add more and more hedges against taking it radically. Such a course has the mark of the unfaithful legalist.

## ACTION

1 Check yourself here. Are you believing God for more of His liberty than you once did? Or have you detoured into safer paths, which are really sinful refusals to launch out and trust the plain words of God?

2 Make certain this principle of living by faith is worked strongly into the fabric of your lifestyle. From the progression of Romans 14, it is clear that God calls you to trust Him alone concerning:

- your right stance before Him (your justification, 3:21–31)
- your victory over the power called 'sin' which lives in you (5–8)

- the renewing of your mind so you can discern between God's will and the devil's deceptions (12:1–2)
- the way you regard yourself and others within the body of Christ (sober judgement has to do with faith, 12:3–5)
- the power and manner of the service you bring to others through the exercise of charismatic gifts (12:5–8)
- the discernment you exercise in regard to the journey of your fellow Christians (14:1–23)
- your understanding of what constitutes sinful action (12:23).

*Before the next chapter:* Read Romans 8:26–39.