



SERMON NOTES FOR CHURCH LEADERS
FOR USE DURING LENT 2017

40ACTS 2017

WEDNESDAY 1 MARCH TO SATURDAY 15 APRIL 2017

40ACTS THEME 2017: ROMANS 12 – A LIVING SACRIFICE

40acts.org.uk



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WELCOME TO 40ACTS 2017

What is 40acts?

Lent marks a pivotal point in the history of the church, when Jesus prepared to give himself up as a sacrifice. Tradition has it that we mark the 40 days of Lent by giving something up, but what if it could be more than that? What if Lent were to become a preparation for a lifetime of big-heartedness?

40acts is a generosity challenge which encourages people to approach Lent differently.

During the 40 days of Lent, 40acts participants are invited to take part in 40 simple acts of generosity which will challenge them to 'do Lent generously' in 2017. The acts or challenges are wide-ranging and various but all are designed to explore what it means to be generous in a very practical way.

They can be done by individuals or done in groups but the key is that small acts of generosity, performed by thousands of people across the UK and beyond, have the power to make a big change to our communities, to our churches and, ultimately, to our world. It's about creating a movement of generosity.

How to use these notes

These seven sermon outlines are designed to help your church explore generosity by sharing some of the ideas and biblical principles that underpin the Easter message. Because we know that churches belong to a wide range of denominations, we've chosen not to provide fully scripted sermons. Instead, we have given you the key ingredients, allowing you to add in the anecdotes and take the detours that will work best for your congregation.

About this series

40acts 2017 takes its inspiration from Romans 12, part of Paul's letter to the burgeoning church in Rome which delivers Paul's understanding of the essential

elements of the Christian faith. In chapter 12, Paul focuses on three key themes: sacrifice, service and love in action. Generosity is in our DNA – the gift of a generous God. Romans 12 tells us why and how we should use that gift. In essence, it answers the question 'What does giving our best look like?'

Each week the notes explore a particular aspect of giving our best, taking the passage verse by verse. The 40acts challenges for each week are designed to complement the theme of that week and become a practical outworking of it. How you choose to engage with the challenges is up to you (more of that in 'Complementary materials' below) but the connection between the two is important.

Complementary materials

These sermon notes can be used alongside the 40acts Together small group resources (tell your small group leaders to sign up at www.40acts.org.uk). In a small group setting, people can examine more closely what it means to give our best and have the opportunity to engage with the daily challenges as a group of individuals, sharing their experiences with each other.

The challenges themselves offer different levels of engagement to allow for individual circumstances, so people can choose what suits them best. There will be a complementary reflection, written by a different author each day, offering their take on that day's challenge, which can be a source of inspiration or insight, and there will be various ways for people to interact with 40acts via social media platforms if that's their preference. However you use these resources, we hope that they are a way for you and your church or group to experience more of what it means to 'give your best'.

Please use these materials in whole or in part, or just as a reference, or not at all. They are a gift from Stewardship, and feedback from churches and their leaders indicates they work well together. Blessings throughout Lent!



Romans 12

A Living Sacrifice

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform 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.

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Love in Action

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

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. Do not be conceited.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my 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:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.





WEEK ONE: PREPARING TO GIVE OUR VERY BEST

→ Key idea:

Prepare to live a life of true worship.

→ Key Bible feature

Romans 12:1-2

A Living Sacrifice

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform 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.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

This week marks the start of 40acts: a 40-day challenge during Lent to transform our generosity. The passage that we're going to be looking at alongside the challenge is Romans 12, a turning point in Paul's letter to the Romans. The whole chapter is concerned with the way that we live, in the light of everything that Paul has expressed about our salvation in the previous 11 chapters.

Beginning with a *therefore*, we know that we'll need a clear *view* of God and all his mercies to us before we launch into attempting all the instructions in the rest of the chapter. There's a danger of feeling overwhelmed when reading very instructional passages like Romans 12, wondering how we can live up to it all. This is why we need a full understanding of our position before God. Our salvation is nothing to do with what we can 'achieve' by good works (Romans 3:21–31) but is about what Jesus has achieved for us through his death.

When God looks at believers he sees the purity of his son instead of our sinfulness. There is nothing we can do to change or affect that.

This is a chance to step back and reassess our motivations for living a Christian life. When we lose focus on the gospel, it's easy for other motives to slip in; for example, trying to gain approval with our busyness and activity, from God, or from other people. We might need to step back and consider what our personal motives have

become. These two verses show that God is concerned with our hearts – we have been assured in Romans 8 that we cannot lose our salvation, so any good that we do for him must come from a place of thanksgiving and love for him, rather than fear that we have to somehow prove ourselves worthy or avoid punishment.

A busy life of service may look good to people from the outside, but God is concerned with our inner *transformation* (v. 2).

Before beginning a challenge like 40acts, we need to examine our hearts. Do we really understand that Jesus is the very best gift we could receive? A pure heart firstly takes delight in the Lord, and in the grace that Paul describes.

Then we are able to complete the acts with love. Seemingly good actions can come out of a bitter heart in any number of aspects: through competition, vanity, perfectionism, resentment, worry... A true understanding of the character of God is the root of a devoted life, acknowledging that all we have comes from him – it's all grace.

Going deeper

The language that Paul uses in verse 1 is in reference to the Jewish practice of temple *sacrifice*. Paul may have in mind the 'burnt offering', which was a 'free' offering of the very best animal, pure and unmarked, burnt as a sign of dedication to God. This differs from the 'sin offering' that represented full atonement for even unknown sins. The differentiation is important because Paul has already described Jesus as our sin offering in Romans 8:3. Our sin and death are dealt with. Our choice is whether we will give our very best in our *living*. Paul *urges* us to commit to an ongoing, daily putting-to-death of our old selves.

The word for *worship* that Paul uses refers to ceremonial temple worship, turning on its head the idea that worship only takes place at a certain location and time. He is emphasising that *true* worship is in our daily living – not just what we do on a Sunday in church. It's just as much about how we live the other six days of the week.

God is concerned with the details of our daily lives and something like 40acts can help to kick-start us or remind us that if we start with small actions eventually those behaviours becomes habitual. Worship is something we do with our *bodies* – it can be very practical work! It's not just about our inner thought-life (although that's where it starts); it involves our whole bodies and therefore our whole lives.



The burnt offering was the very best animal, set apart for God and wholly given. Do we give God our very best or are we tempted to put off our service for him? Are we waiting for a time when we're more settled, more financially secure, more advanced in our careers? Waiting for the kids to move out, or our retirement, or our parents no longer to need our care? Jesus deserves our very best: our youth, our health, our time. *'True and proper worship'* translates more directly as 'rational worship': this is not a senseless, blind obedience to a demanding God, but a reasonable response to Jesus' pure and sacrificial love for us.

Application

What this could mean for us...

How can we achieve this life of service to God without burning out? How can we even attempt to complete 40 generous acts for the next 40 days without collapsing from exhaustion? The answer is found in Colossians 1:29, where Paul describes the strenuousness involved in his ministry. He does not strive on his own but with *all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me*.

Most of us will recognise that attempting self-improvement is a laborious and failure-ridden task, whether that's trying to give something up or begin a new routine. It's the power of God that effects true change – our faith gives us not just the motivation to do what is right but the *power* to do so (Romans 8:11; Ephesians 1:19–20).

We cannot avoid conforming to the pattern of this world without continually *renewing our minds* (v. 2) – the two things are inextricably linked. Although we are saved, left unchecked our natural tendency will still lead us to imitate the world that surrounds us.

- There might be aspects of life where we haven't even considered a different option, accepting the world's view as the norm.
- Or there might be things that we even consider to be good which we need to change to live distinctively for God.

For example, it's good to care for our families, but if protecting them becomes our only focus in life it can become an idol. It might be easy to identify where we see others conforming, but more difficult to identify the areas of our own lives that are in danger of blending in with the rest of the world. It's good for us all to take a look at our current habits and inclinations and ask God to reveal any way in which idolatry has crept into our lives. This isn't a one-time procedure – the act of *renewing* is continual, just as we need to be repeatedly filled with the Holy Spirit. To

renew is to give fresh life to something, or to replace it: a consistent exchanging of worldly thoughts with the truth.

So how do we go about renewing our minds?

The mind can be an instrument for good or for evil, depending on what it has been fed. Our minds need to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and by the truth, and this is not purely an intellectual process. As we meditate on God's Word, our minds will start to reorient. This is what began change in the lives of the disciples – they were affected by the time they spent with Jesus and by observing his perfect life. With all their various backgrounds and temperaments, they each became confident in the gospel and did amazing work for the kingdom.

The same transformation can happen to us when we find delight in Jesus. The incredible and unique truth about the Christian life is that this is not just an academic inputting of facts into our heads, but the result of a relationship with him where we listen, speak, ask and receive and grow to be more like him in the process.

If we are continually renewing our minds, we are in the best position to know where God is leading us and how to act day to day. 40acts is a good time to start putting this into practice. When Paul says to *test and approve* (v. 2), this doesn't just mean pondering and praying inside our heads but experimenting and testing by action. We learn by firstly discerning what to do and then giving it a go, and when we ask God for opportunities and actually take them, we can trust that he will use our willingness for good (Romans 8:28).

God is in the business of transformation: take Paul who wrote this letter, converted from religious terrorist to an apostle of Jesus, teaching about God's grace. Contrary to what we might believe, it is possible for every one of us to live more radically for Jesus. We might assume we could never make a significant difference for the gospel, but the Bible constantly tells us of transformed lives.

Peter, who was ashamed of and rejected Jesus, eventually laid down his life for his faith... Jonah, who ran away from God, eventually preached God's message and converted thousands... Moses, who had committed murder, went on to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land and experience an amazingly close relationship with God... When we reflect on God's Word, and our minds are renewed, we are able to accept his calling on our lives. Philippians 4:8–9 tells us to think on whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely... and to put God's teachings into practice.

If you are able, spend time reflecting on the first 11 chapters of Romans this week, feeding and enriching your

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mind with the goodness of the Word ready for the start of Lent and a new challenge to put love into action.

Additional resources

1. Additional linked verses
1 Corinthians 6:19–20

2. Prayers

Opening declaration

Isaiah 60:1 Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

Lord, we ask that by the light of your salvation we will gain a clear view of God and of all his mercies to us as we meet together in worship. We ask that you will help us to step back and reassess our motivation for living the Christian life, and that in response we will offer true and generous hearts in service to you. Amen.

Prayer of confession

Dear Lord, forgive us for the times we have lost focus on the gospel and have let selfish motives slip in; for the times when we have sought approval in being over-busy or we have withdrawn from doing good because of fears of reproof. Help us to live each day so that any good we do may be motivated by thanksgiving and by love for God. Help us to experience inner transformation and to understand that Jesus is the very best gift that we can receive.

Dear Lord, forgive us for the times we have been preoccupied with our own agenda rather than seeking your will; when we have gone on in our own strength, and when we have failed to notice that we are accepting the world's view rather than looking from your perspective. Help us to commit to an ongoing putting-to-death of our old selves so that we may show true worship in our daily tasks. Help us to live distinctively for God, and not be satisfied with doing only second best for him. Amen.

Prayer for today

Dear Lord, Your words completely transformed the lives of your faithful first disciples. Despite their various backgrounds and temperaments, they were equally affected by the time they spent with you and by observing your perfect life. So may we too be ready to receive your truth into our hearts and to join in the ongoing work of your kingdom. Help us to listen, speak, ask, receive and grow to be more like you.

Renew our minds daily so that we can follow you more nearly. Amen.

The way of the heart

The way of the bitter and selfish heart runs
through competition
through vanity
through perfectionism
through resentment
through worry.

The way of the pure and clean heart runs
through devotion
through simplicity
through service
through sacrifice
through love.

The way of the broken and contrite heart
takes delight in the Lord
brings whole-hearted worship
offers everything and all
finds forgiveness and peace...
It is a welcome and fragrant offering
which the Lord will not despise.

Closing prayer

Father God, as we prepare to go out to begin another week, help us in the light of Christ's salvation to offer up all that we do as a sacrifice of true worship, to give you our very best and to do your good, pleasing and perfect will in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

3. Suggested songs

- 'Humbly I stand, an offering' ('Everything and nothing less') by Aaron Levy et al. (2015)
[youtube.com/watch?v=FNOAI9UDHUY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNOAI9UDHUY)
- 'And can it be?' by Charles Wesley (1707–88)
[youtube.com/watch?v=sQelGbKqiw8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQelGbKqiw8)
- 'Bless the Lord, O my soul' ('10,000 reasons') by Matt Redman and Jonas Myrin (2011)
[google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=10+000+reasons](https://www.google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=10+000+reasons)
- 'Take these hands' ('All I am') by Phil Wickham (2011)
[google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=all+I+am+Phil+Wickham](https://www.google.co.uk/?gws_rd=ssl#q=all+I+am+Phil+Wickham)

4. Suggested video clip

A words only and music reflection on bringing our all to God and being still as we come before him in worship
[youtube.com/watch?v=BDoAmBOegPY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDoAmBOegPY)





WEEK TWO: GIVING OUR BEST TO OTHERS IN THE CHURCH

→ Key idea

Living selflessly together as the family of God.

→ Key Bible feature

Romans 12: 3-5

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Paul is advising the church on how it can operate at its very best and he begins by addressing the way that we view ourselves. He recognises that our opinion of ourselves has a much wider impact on the church as a whole and the attitudes we have towards each other, so it's the first thing we have to get in line with God.

Paul describes the way we should judge ourselves as *sober*, which indicates that we need to be clear-headed and honest with ourselves and understand the reality of the gospel. When Paul says, *in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you*, he is not suggesting a variance in the distribution of faith to each person.

Instead he wants us to understand that, regardless of our other differences, we've each received our salvation from God alone. This grace gives us equal standing as his children; without Jesus, all of us would be lost in our guilt and sin. So if we are equal in God's eyes, how can we view ourselves more highly than others? There is nothing that we possess which we have not been given by him, including even our faith (1 Corinthians 4:7).

This means that there's no room for either superiority or inferiority in the church. If we don't go straight to God to find out who we are, we will start to look to our left or right and compare ourselves with those around us. God does

not judge by the same standards as we experience in the world (1 Samuel 16:7). Our default setting is to judge others on the basis of outward markers such as physical appearance, talent, status, wealth, power and so on. None of this matters to God. What matters to him is the inward markers – what goes on in our hearts: the fruit of the Spirit growing in us. He has appointed us with different gifts specifically, with a purpose that goes far beyond our human understanding.

Going deeper

Because God sees the big picture, he understands how each one of us as an individual forms part of the whole church. In vv. 4–5 Paul uses the picture of a human *body* to illustrate the point. Though some parts may appear less significant, they are vital in ensuring that the whole body functions well.

The tiniest muscle in the human body is called the stapedius and it's found in the middle ear. Despite its size it does an important job in protecting our ears from loud noises. As humans we often see certain gifts (perhaps those that are more on show) as more praiseworthy than others, but for a fully healthy body every single part is important.

Pride (and its close relation 'false modesty') can throw a spanner in the works when it comes to a healthy functioning church. By definition, our gifts are only what we have received from God – they have been given to us; therefore no one has any reason to boast (Ephesians 2:9) or feel hard done by.

God hasn't specially favoured some with better gifts, but has distributed them all to fit perfectly together for the work that he has prepared for us to do (Ephesians 2:10). It's difficult to get our heads around this concept in a society that is so individualistic, and it's extremely counter-cultural to see ourselves as just one small part of a much larger whole.

In practice

There are different ways that pride may interfere with the functioning of the church and they are easy traps to fall into.

- It's tempting to hanker after certain skills or tasks because of the 'status' they confer or the praise that accompanies them, instead of concentrating on putting our own gifts to good use. This can deny opportunities to those whom God has equipped and leave their gifts unused.



- If we have an understanding of our gifts it can also be very tempting to use them solely for personal gain or glory. Rather than sharing the gifts God has given us with the church, we keep them to ourselves. It's like part of the body withdrawing its labour or refusing to cooperate with the other parts, forgetting that *each member belongs to all the others*.

The antidote to these and other behaviours which get in the way of a fully functioning body of Christ is humility. Humility starts with being thankful, not just for our own unique combination of gifts but also for what God has given to others. Encouraging each other, and praising God when we see the outworking of his gifts in the life of another, counteracts envy. Humility lies in remembering that on our own we cannot achieve much – we are always fully reliant on God working through us and through other members of the body. We all have our limitations; each part of a human body can only do so much on its own (1 Corinthians 12:17).

The triathlete Brownlee brothers' race at the 2016 World Series was a story that captured the attention of the media. Jonny Brownlee was in the lead at the final 300m when he began to suffer from exhaustion, weaving across the track and almost coming to a stop. The video of his brother Alistair running up behind him, throwing Jonny's arm over his shoulder and supporting him to the finish line, before pushing him into second place (himself taking third), demonstrated the power of brotherly love, sacrifice and humility.

God made us interdependent for a purpose as members that *belong* to a much larger whole. There is synergy when all the elements cooperate together; in following God's blueprint, the body of Christ far exceeds what a collection of individuals could achieve on their own. We were made to work together and that is how we work best.

These verses are very important to bear in mind when thinking about our own local church. Although they also apply to the wider church, they are lived out in the day-to-day workings of each church family. And we call it a family for good reason. Paul states that each member *belongs* to the others – there's a sense of ownership and connection between us as individuals. But how do we see this at work within our own church? Do we view it as a Sunday activity, a social club, (a job!) or somewhere purely to think about God that's detached from the rest of our lives? When we really absorb what belonging to one another means, it connects us all far more than probably most of us feel.

Throughout the New Testament Paul continually addresses the recipients of his letters as brothers and sisters in Christ, and in 1 Timothy 5:1–2 he urges us to relate to one another as mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters. We all have different experiences of family, and for some of us it might be hard to see family as a positive thing. But in a secure family unit there is a strong loyalty and love that is noticeable in the members' actions towards each other. When it comes to other members of the church, do we show that same commitment that we see in a loving family? It's a big challenge to ask ourselves whether we'd be willing to share our belongings and time as if we were sharing with direct family members. The phrase 'blood is thicker than water' is sometimes used to explain the strong bonds and allegiance between relatives. In a healthy church body, love for each other should be even stronger, because those bonds are ultimate. We recognise that we need to take care of every part, and a benefit to one is a benefit to all.

Application

What this could mean for us...

As we receive different 40acts challenges this week, let's really consider how we can use those prompts to love the other members of our church family in a practical way. And there may be other things that we need to reconsider about our attitude to church and to other believers.

Maybe, for some of us, it feels as if there's something holding us back from fully participating in church life. Perhaps church has been a hurtful place in the past and you need to talk and pray through those experiences to allow for healing.

Maybe you've got so many different or difficult commitments in life that church can feel like a burden and another thing to fit into the week.

Whatever your experience, know that you're a necessary part of this church. Don't write yourself off – the church will be missing out on what you have to offer.

On the other hand, maybe you're the person who takes too much on; who fills in the gaps left by others. How can we as the body of Christ help one another?

It's always helpful to reconsider the way we view church. It's so much more than just a club or organisation to contribute to. It's a living breathing whole body where we each connect to each other. During this week of 40acts, let's think about how we can demonstrate that bond through our actions, not just today but every day.



Additional resources

1. Additional linked verses
1 Corinthians 12:12–27

2. Prayers

Opening declaration

Ephesians 2:8–10 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Lord, today, may we hear your voice speaking clearly to us as your family meeting here together. Amen.

Prayer of confession

Lord Jesus Christ, we acknowledge where we have failed you in our relationships with other people. We have at times regarded ourselves more highly than we ought, and at other times we have underrated ourselves in comparison with those we praise. We have boasted, and at times pride and false modesty have interfered with the healthy running of your church. We have hankered after certain skills or tasks because they offer status or confer praise. We have denied opportunities for others to demonstrate their gifts and left their skills unused. We have used our gifts solely for personal gain and glory. We have failed to share our gifts and kept them to ourselves. We have withdrawn or refused to cooperate, forgetting that we are all one body together, your people, your church. Lord Jesus Christ, we ask for your forgiveness. Enable all of us to judge ourselves with soberness, to be clear-headed and honest with one another in the freedom and light of the gospel. Despite all our differences, grant us the grace to know that we have each received salvation from God alone and that all have equal standing as God’s children, for without you, Jesus, we would be lost in sin and guilt. This we ask in your precious name. Amen.

Prayer for today

Gracious Lord, Paul instructed Timothy his co-worker and friend that those in the church should relate to one

another as members of God’s family – like mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters – to be loving and to take care of each other, to know that as one member benefits, all benefit, and as one member suffers, all suffer. May we in the same way respond to your prompts to show practical love within the church; may we reconsider our attitudes where they fall short of those that reflect your glory; may we acknowledge where we are holding back and not participating fully in your body. Heal the hurts of the past and lift the burdens that we carry. Amen.

Meeting together

We meet as the family of God – brothers and sisters joining with one purpose to love and worship the Lord. We meet as the family of God – adopted children of Abba, our Father.

We meet as the family of God – with Jesus at the centre, our Lord and Saviour, Christ.

We meet as the family of God – united as one by the power of the Spirit.

In love and praise we gather together today – we meet as the family of God.

Closing prayer

Loving Father God, send us out with your blessing as members of your family, your church, so that we will continue to encourage and uphold one another in prayer and actions throughout the week ahead. May we live selflessly for one another, giving our very best to others and to you. Amen.

3. Suggested songs

- ‘Everyone needs compassion’ (‘Mighty to save’) by Reuben Morgan and Ben Fielding (2006)
[youtube.com/watch?v=-08YZF87OBQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-08YZF87OBQ)
- ‘In all I do and all I say’ (‘This is my worship’) by Nathan Fellingham (2008)
[youtube.com/watch?v=jKXHGGtPTtQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jKXHGGtPTtQ)
- ‘God in my living’ (‘Everything’) by Tim Hughes (2005)
[youtube.com/watch?v=SOY-eHUsHdM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOY-eHUsHdM)
- ‘We are taller when we bow’ (‘Let us be broken’) by Mark Tedder et al. (2006)
[youtube.com/watch?v=nddGchJPHKc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nddGchJPHKc)

4. Suggested video clip

Short excerpt from Disney’s Toy Story on the value of belonging to someone.

[youtube.com/watch?v=hZVQTVc7etM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZVQTVc7etM)





WEEK THREE: GIVING OUR BEST WITH OUR GIFTS

→ Key idea

Using our gifts faithfully for the good of the whole church.

→ Key Bible feature

Romans 12: 6–8

Humble Service in the Body of Christ

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

Last week we looked at Paul's description of the church as a body and the important part each one of us plays in serving God. That's how the body works best: when we each do what we're made to do. We considered the attitude that we need for this to be possible: a humble opinion of ourselves and a distinctive close family love for other members of the church. We're now going to look at the seven examples of gifts in the church that Paul highlights. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it is helpful as a way to understand that they are all important because they are God-given.

Paul re-emphasises that idea that we all have *different* gifts – and that every one of those gifts is a result of the *grace of God* – not because of anything we have achieved on our own. It is not that some have been given more grace and so have more exciting gifts, but that any and all gifts are a product of that grace. Paul also addresses this in 1 Corinthians 12:4–6:

There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Therefore there is no hierarchy of gifts according to God – it is only that we are to use each of our gifts faithfully.

Paul's writing in this section of Romans is unusually repetitive but if we turn to the ESV translation we start to understand the emphasis:

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

The repetition of the word 'in' before most of the gifts emphasises that we are to be absorbed *in* that particular service – not looking longingly at other gifts and veering into areas that aren't our gifting. There's also a sense that Paul is saying 'Just do it!' Just as he encourages in 1 Timothy 4:15, we are to give ourselves wholly to those areas of service that fit our gifts.

Going deeper

It's worth taking a brief look at each of the gifts that Paul names.

Prophecy

Prophesying does not necessarily mean predicting the future; it can mean divinely inspired preaching: the direct and specific application of God's wisdom and biblical teaching to life. Prophets are often bold and articulate speakers but key to this is that the delivery of the message is in line with the inspiration – neither holding back nor overstating what has been received from God.

Serving

Serving – or, in other versions, 'ministering' – is any kind of administrative or practical service in the church. Although it may seem to us a more 'lowly' form of service, Paul puts it right up there with prophecy to show its importance in the operating of the church. In Acts 6, in fact, we see the selection of seven men to the practical task of distributing food to widows. For this job the disciples specifically chose men who were *full of the Spirit and wisdom* (v. 3). Holiness isn't limited to those who preach or teach. Godly character is central to every kind of service.

Teaching

In the same way, teaching encompasses a wide range of forms. Teachers are clear thinkers, gifted in explaining biblical principles. The context can vary from large to small groups, discussions or simple one-to-one conversations.



Encouraging

The original word for encouraging in this verse is *parakaleo*, which can also mean counselling. Encouragers know how to motivate others but also offer comfort. They have the ability to say the right word at the right time. This gift features throughout Acts to follow up teaching or preaching and is closely linked with those things.

Giving

While giving is something that we are all required to do (Luke 6:38; Proverbs 28:27), Paul has hit on a very particular group of people who have the gift of giving. In 2 Corinthians 8:7 Paul talks about the 'grace of giving', recognising it as a spiritual gift. The way in which we handle money is closely linked to our spiritual health and so generous givers not only meet others' needs but also help us to see a little of God's generosity at work.

Leading

It's important to cast aside the usual stereotypes when it comes to leadership because they don't apply here. The word for leading in verse 8 is used in other places in the Bible when discussing elders of the church, but also for a position as the head of a family. Various translations use words such as 'diligence' and 'zeal' to describe the style of leadership, which implies care and steady application but also a genuine love and delight in the role.

Showing mercy

Last but not least is mercy. Again, as Christians this is something we are all called to do, as God has shown us mercy. But some may have a special gift for caring and they do it with joy, bringing the light of compassion into people's lives.

The point to remember with all of these gifts is that they have to come out of that grace that Paul talks about in verse 6. Unless we renew our minds (v. 2), we will forget God's grace to us and begin to attempt to use our gifts through our own strength or for our own purposes. Our motivation should be love for others, because of his love for us (1 John 4:19–21).

Application

What this could mean for us...

Paul is encouraging us to do our best at what we do best. We're made for a purpose because God chose those gifts and included them in his plans and purposes but it's up to us to use them. Bringing glory to God through using our gifts is our most rewarding work and our *true and proper worship*, which we looked at in verse 1. On the other hand, using our gifts to bring glory to ourselves will leave

us disappointed – we will never have enough and will always be seeking after more.

But this is not just about us as individuals; it's also about us as the body of Christ, in our church, in our families, in our work, in our social circles and communities. Our church should model and celebrate diversity. In a world that creates divisions between different types of people, the church should be a place that celebrates the unique gifts of each member because that's how Paul has told us it functions best: when each part of the body is doing its different job rather than trying to mimic or compete with the others.

A couple at a London church found that their hobby of and flair for cocktail making was actually something that they could use to serve the church; see their story here: stewardship.org.uk/blog/blog/post/456-surprising-uses-for-hidden-talents. The church shouldn't be a place where our sole aim is to blend in and look like everybody else. It's true that we all need the same foundation of faith, but when it comes to our gifts we shouldn't worry about standing out, especially if our gifts are different from the norm – that is what makes the church beautiful and most reflective of the character of God.

Perhaps you are unsure of your gifts; in this case, a helpful exercise is to talk it through with somebody who knows you well. You might be surprised at what they have to say!

Spend some time this week thinking about what you have to offer, or reviewing the ways in which you're currently serving. See if you can use any of your gifts during 40acts this week. We all need to benefit from each other's gifts. How can you serve somebody this week with the specific talents that God has blessed you with? Or is there anybody whose gifts you could help identify? If you see a potential talent in somebody, let them know and encourage them in it.

Additional resources

1. Additional linked verses

Matthew 25:14–30

2. Prayers

Opening declaration

1 Corinthians 12:4–6 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

Work in us today, Gracious God, we pray. Amen.



Prayer of confession

Loving Lord Jesus, we are sorry that we have failed to understand and use aright the spiritual gifts that you have given us. We have conceived that there is a hierarchy of gifts in the church, yet you perceive them to be equal. We have not used our gifts faithfully or in the knowledge of God's goodness. We have tried to blend in, when we should have been shining out to your glory. We have looked longingly at others' gifts and neglected our own, forgetting to celebrate the unique giftings that the Spirit bestows on each of us. Help us instead to be our best and to do the best that we can. Help us to see that our differences make the church more beautiful and that the church in all its colours is a reflection of the character of God the Father. Amen.

We are your people (by Nick Harding)

We are your people, we live to serve you with our different gifts and abilities.

We are your people, we live to serve you from our different backgrounds and experiences.

We are your people, we live to serve you with our different ages and needs.

We are your people, we live to serve you, each of us called, each of us willing.

We are your people, we live to serve you.

Closing prayer

Lord, help us to fulfil our God-given potential to play our part within your church.

Lord, encourage us to find our identity not in what we do but in who you are.

Lord, enable us to build your kingdom now, that we may be ready for when you return as King. Amen.

3. Suggested songs

- 'Here is love' by William Rees (1802–83)/Matt Redman (2004)
[youtube.com/watch?v=TS56VqfAQPw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TS56VqfAQPw)
- 'For every song' ('You are') by Ben Cantelon et al. (2007)
[youtube.com/watch?v=4cYZfujRW8I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4cYZfujRW8I)
- 'Forth in thy name, O Lord, I go' by Charles Wesley (1707–88)
[youtube.com/watch?v=-X-4HRj8III](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-X-4HRj8III)
- 'Giver of life' by Tim Hughes (2004)
[youtube.com/watch?v=OJG1sBtpczU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJG1sBtpczU)

4. Suggested video clip

A very gentle video clip exploring the link between creativity and the pressure of time. This could be used to illustrate that often we put ourselves under pressure in many ways in how we might use our spiritual gifts and sometimes we need to stand back a little and give ourselves and one another more time.

[youtube.com/watch?v=VPbjSnZnWPO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPbjSnZnWPO)



WEEK FOUR: GIVING OUR BEST WHEN SERVING OTHERS

→ Key idea

Going far beyond expectations in our love for each other.

→ Key Bible feature

Romans 12:9-13

Love in Action

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practise hospitality.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

In the last couple of weeks we have looked at what each of us has to offer and how we can use the gifts God's given us to bless others in the church. Now Paul reminds us of the importance of how we act: with love. He emphasises that it's about the attitude of our hearts rather than what or how much we are doing.

The key is *sincerity*. We can do many seemingly good acts, but if they are motivated by anything other than love then they are worthless. This is a theme that Paul also tackles in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

What we might see on the surface as being good, selfless or holy doesn't cut it with God unless our actions stem from genuine love. It's easy to appear nice on the surface but what's going on behind the scenes? Flattery and superficial niceness don't fool God and don't honour him.

We all experience meeting people whom we find easy to love, and equally those whom we struggle to love. It can be hard to feel loving towards people whose opinions, manners or personality clash with our own! So how do we

make sure that our love for others is genuine? It comes back to verse 2 again. To love sincerely we need that continual renewing of our minds, reminding ourselves daily of how much Jesus has done for us, and reflecting on his life. 1 John 4:19 spells it out to us: *We love because he first loved us*. And the more that message sinks in, the more our motivation to love others will spring from a genuine desire to please God above anybody else.

The next two instructions help us to keep that sincerity. The words are really emphatic here: we are *to hate what is evil* – to loathe it and avoid it at all costs. This might seem obvious, but in Luke 16:15 Jesus reminds us just how contrary God's opinion of evil is to ours:

He said to them, 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God's sight.'

We make sure we have a right view of evil by *clinging to what is good* – and the epitome of goodness is God himself. When we see his beauty and goodness, the ideals of the world will seem less attractive to us. Whereas, left unchecked, our minds will lead us to value those things that God hates. The word for *cling* has connotations of 'gluing' – that we should absolutely fix ourselves, cling for dear life, to goodness. And this takes place in the mind, as Paul affirms in Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.

Going deeper

Paul pushes the idea of sincere love further when he tells us to *be devoted to one another in love*. Some versions use the term 'brotherly' love, because in the original text the words evoke a kind of instinctive family love, similar to the feelings a mother might experience towards her newborn baby.

This radical language is another reminder that as Christians we *belong* to one another (Romans 12:5) as parts of one body, one family. In fact, the love we should have for our Christian brothers and sisters goes beyond family connections, because we have a bond that is everlasting.

The ESV translation says *outdo one another in showing honour* (v. 10) – this should be the only element of competition amongst us: which of us can show the most honour to others? Naturally, we often strive for other people's respect, but Paul twists that whole notion on its

head. It's not about waiting for another person to show us honour, but about making the first move to show regard for someone else.

It's easy to give up and stop bothering if the respect we show someone is not returned to us. Self-help or well-being magazine articles encourage us to just exclude negative people from our lives – but Paul tells us to *prefer* another person's interests above our own. A healthy self-forgetfulness is key to creating true unity within the church: seeing the whole over the individual.

When you read this passage you realise why gossip and backbiting are so toxic to community. A few idle comments can develop into a culture that is divisive. This goes completely against Paul's encouragement to love sincerely.

It takes energy to love like this, which links to the next verse (11), where Paul encourages us to keep up our effort and determination. But it's impossible to do this without the Holy Spirit working within us. The word *zeal*, or 'fervent', that Paul uses literally means boiling. A pan of water needs to be placed over a flame in order to bubble and boil. As Christians, we need the flame of the Holy Spirit sustaining us through life or else we'll turn cold.

The 40acts challenges could easily lead to burn-out if we end up labouring under our own strength. When we find ourselves feeling apathetic, we can ask to be filled up again. Perhaps we need to take some time out to reflect and let God refresh us (Psalm 23:2–3).

All three of the directions in verse 12 work together. Paul tells us to be *joyful in hope* – this joy is the antithesis to apathy. It's not about happiness, which may be based on our circumstances, or about our temperament – being a naturally positive person. Both of these can come and go. In the summer of 2005, London experienced one of its happiest celebratory days when it was announced that it would become an Olympic host city.

People were buzzing with excitement and energy at the news. The day after, the 07/07 London bombings devastated the capital – it was one of the city's saddest days in recent history. We can't rely on anything else for joy because life can fluctuate from minute to minute.

Paul is talking about a joy that has firm foundations. It stems from the hope that Jesus has given us: that we will one day be with him in paradise. No matter what we are going through, we keep that at the core of our being. To be *patient in affliction* we need this joy as our foundation or we will easily give up and give in to the sadness of difficult circumstances.

Patience is not just about endurance, but about perseverance: keeping the long view in mind and believing the promise that we have for our future.

Christians who have been in the most horrific of circumstances have nothing but to cling onto the joy of that hope to get through. When Betsy and Corrie ten Boom were held captive in a concentration camp during the Second World War, they still sang songs of praise to God because of their hope. They knew that they would one day be in a place with no more mourning, crying or pain (Revelation 21:4). They constantly called on the Lord in prayer. This verse is similar to 1 Thessalonians 5:16–18:

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

Joyfulness and prayer seem to go together. When we come to God in prayer our faith is strengthened and we can find joy and patience.

Finally, in verse 13, Paul focuses again on putting love into action, particularly when it comes to those who are most in need. We must look after our Christian brothers and sisters as we would our own flesh and blood. The *hospitality* that is mentioned refers particularly to welcoming strangers. It can seem alien or even dangerous to us to open up our homes to people we don't know, but being willing to do so is a hallmark of sincere love for others.

Application

What this could mean for us...

These verses about love lead us straight back to the greatest commandments: to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves (Matthew 22:37–39). We can't truly love our neighbour unless we first love God, because our motives can so easily be skewed.

This week let's put our very best into serving others, but start by coming to God for the strength that only he can provide. Through the practical challenges of 40acts this week, we have the opportunity to go the extra mile in serving each other.

Perhaps think about how you can use your home or possessions to bless someone else in need. Paul tells us not just to give things away but to *share* with each other. This can actually take a lot more effort and energy because it involves personal relationship – sharing a meal with someone or letting people borrow possessions that we



still need means giving of ourselves, our trust and our time too.

Or maybe you feel you have little to give this week because you're struggling with difficulties or exhausted and lacking in enthusiasm. Begin to remind yourself of the hope of salvation that you have in Jesus and let him restore you with the joy of knowing him who's gone through the very worst for our sake.

Show radical love for each other, because he showed radical love for us.

Additional resources

1. Prayers

Opening declaration

Matthew 22:37–39 Love God with all your heart, soul and mind and your neighbour as yourself.

We come before Almighty God with so many things on our hearts, in our souls and on our minds.

We pray today that God will show us and that we might understand what is truly important, so that we might be transformed to his goodness in our whole beings. Amen.

Prayer of confession

Jesus, gentle Saviour, our perfect example and teacher, we seek your mercy and healing today. We are sorry that often our actions towards others have stemmed from motivations other than genuine love. We have tried to be nice but have harboured grudges. We have tried to gain popularity through flattery and superficial pleasantries. We have failed to see God's beauty and goodness and have instead been attracted to the ideals of consumerism. We have left our minds unchecked and valued what God hates. We have not been open to joy and have too easily given in to sadness in difficult circumstances.

Jesus, gentle Saviour, teach us when to be the first to show regard for someone else rather than waiting for someone else to honour us. Teach us to move beyond wanting self-help and personal well-being to having a healthy dose of self-forgetfulness. Teach us to avoid gossip and backbiting and making divisive idle comments. We praise you for your mercy and we thank you for your love. Amen.

Prayer for today

Just as the Christians in the early church at Philippi were encouraged by Paul to focus on what is praiseworthy and excellent, so may we fill our minds

and our thinking with whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable. Holy Spirit, we ask that you will transform our conscious and unconscious thoughts, that whatever passes through our minds might be of glory to our Creator and Maker. Amen.

Reaching out prayer (based on 1 John 4:7)

Dear friends, let us reach out beyond our boundaries and by breaking down barriers.

Let us love one another for love comes from God.

Dear friends, let us reach out to welcome the unloved and 'unlovable'.

Let us love one another for love comes from God.

Dear friends, let us reach out as Jesus did, by sharing love with others.

Let us love one another for love comes from God.

Let us reach out to all with the love of God. Amen.

Closing prayer

Jesus, our Redeemer and our Friend, you paid the highest price so that we could be free. Help us to be so mindful of this during the coming week that we will offer up our very best in worship to you and in serving others. Help us to go the second mile and beyond expectations, so that your glory will shine out from our lives. Amen.

2. Suggested songs

- 'My hope is built on nothing less' ('Cornerstone') by Jonas Myrin et al. (2011)
[youtube.com/watch?v=QvLxZEU02uI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QvLxZEU02uI)
- 'Form us' by Casey Corum and Anabeth Morgan (2010)
[youtube.com/watch?v=YcS9mtUAgBA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcS9mtUAgBA)
- 'Fill thou my life, O Lord my God' by Horatius Bonar (1808–89)
[youtube.com/watch?v=_2mpY0NahNQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_2mpY0NahNQ)
- 'Make me a channel of your peace' (based on a traditional prayer)
[youtube.com/watch?v=ihhvm6eLWZI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ihhvm6eLWZI)

3. Suggested video clip

A slightly longer video clip of words, images and helpful sayings to prompt an understanding of what it means to find joy.

videomotivational.com/best-clips/happiness-videos/simple-secrets-to-a-happy-life-finding-joy/





WEEK FIVE: GIVING OUR BEST DESPITE OUR FEELINGS

→ Key idea

Putting others before ourselves, regardless of their circumstances, position or behaviour toward us.

→ Key Bible feature

Romans 12:14-16

Love in Action

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. Do not be conceited.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

We've looked previously at what it means to treat other members of the church as our Christian brothers and sisters, and with this week's passage Paul gets even more counter-cultural.

Blessing

Verse 14 starts with a big ask – to do good to those who have done wrong to us. We will be looking at this whole area more closely next week, but we can already see how strongly Paul emphasises it – saying it not once but twice.

'Cursing' may, to us, conjure up images of witches' chants, but it really just means bearing ill-will towards someone – which is the start of a slippery slope. Our naturally strong sense of justice can become twisted into a desire to retaliate. The Holy Spirit is the only one who's really going to help us turn it around – we might just about be humanly able to muster up the will to ignore those who hurt us, but to turn that into blessing needs divine input.

For a template we need look no further than Jesus on the cross (Luke 23:34):

Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.'

As he was being put on the cross, Jesus had compassion on those who were hammering in the nails.

Sometimes praying for people who have hurt us is even more difficult than being outwardly friendly because it requires us to really be honest with God about what's going on in our hearts. Over time, consistent prayer is actually what will transform our feelings of pain or unforgiveness too.

Empathy

Verse 15 may seem straightforward on the face of it, but Paul is calling us to much more than social etiquette. This is about being united to each other, as Paul further explains in 1 Corinthians 12:25–26:

...so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

When we understand the connection we have as one body, we are affected by each other's joys and difficulties and want to respond appropriately. More than that, if we are honoured and nurtured in a community then we are stronger and more able to weather the ups and downs of life.

Joy is infectious. Everyone (including Jesus) loves a good wedding celebration. Whether it's a significant birthday or a house-warming, sharing in each other's joy and celebrating brings us together. But as the body of Christ this is not just about a knees-up with friends, or our own comfortable social circle; this is about genuinely rejoicing with all our church family. That is what makes us distinctive.

Writer Gore Vidal said: 'Whenever a friend succeeds, a little something inside of me dies.' His brutal honesty reflects some of the difficulty we may have rejoicing with others, especially when we ourselves are facing difficult times. We are more able to rejoice with others when our main source of joy stems from the hope that we have in Jesus (v. 12). It's often tough to keep an eternal perspective in the forefront of our minds, but when we do it frees us up to experience the joy and sorrow of those around us without envy or bitterness.

Standing with each other in sadness or difficulty is also important. It can lighten a burden, reduce the sense of isolation or provide comfort. A church family is like any other family: it experiences the highs and lows of life and these are better experienced together.

In John 11:33–36 we see how much Jesus was affected by his friends mourning:



When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. 'Where have you laid him?' he asked.

'Come and see, Lord,' they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!'

Even though he knew that he was about to raise Lazarus from the dead and that they would soon be rejoicing, Jesus wept with his friends and empathised with them in their grief.

It shows true selflessness to regard another's emotions as if they are our own – to walk in their shoes, so to speak. It means holding back on the advice (although sometimes this may be necessary), listening, and imagining somebody else's situation and sharing in their pain. It's what it means to *belong* to one another (v. 5).

Humility

Verse 16 is translated in some versions that we should be 'of the same mind' – not that we must agree on every issue but that we should empathise with another's position and *honour one another above ourselves* (v. 10). This is only possible when we are willing to submit to Jesus as the head of the body (Ephesians 4:15).

Philippians 2:5–8 describes the Christ-like mindset that promotes harmony amongst Christians:

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!*

So if Jesus loved others without discrimination who are we to see anybody as beneath ourselves?

Another possible interpretation of verse 16 is to do with being willing to perform lowly, menial tasks. In this, too, Jesus is our perfect example – performing the act of a slave in washing the disciples' feet (John 13).

In a 'me first' world, it's the norm to put others down to improve our situation. But as followers of Jesus, it's not about bettering ourselves but about lowering ourselves. Humility is the antidote. If we want to live in *harmony* with

other people, we have to start with keeping our own minds open and teachable, learning from our own errors rather than pointing out others' weaknesses. We already have the love and acceptance of our Father God, and when we understand the significance of that, it releases us from the pressure of having to prove to everyone else how much we are worth. To him we are worth the very highest price he could pay.

Application

What this could mean for us...

In light of all this then, we can be content in whatever position we are currently in, as Paul learnt to be (Philippians 4:11–12) – our ambition, instead of improving our status or wealth, is to be as much as we can like Jesus. Today, many of us are used to seeing carefully curated presentations of people on social media or in magazines and on TV, but these verses seriously challenge that kind of selective display of the good bits of our lives. Instead we can start to look out for those unglamorous, un-Instagram-able menial tasks. Spend time with and learn from those who are outside the limelight.

Who can you rejoice with this week? Who can you mourn with? How can you put aside your own feelings to share in somebody else's?

In our 40acts, let's step up to the challenge to do good not only to our friends but also to those who have hurt us. Or let's spend time with someone whom we would usually avoid. We don't need to fear rejection when we're safe in the knowledge that we already have the friendship and love of our creator.

Additional resources

1. Prayers

Opening declaration

Philippians 2: 5–8 In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking on the nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross.

Risen and living Lord Jesus, we ask that you will show us more of yourself today and transform our lives.

Amen.



Prayer of confession

In a blame-centred world, Jesus comes ready to greet, without condemnation, those who choose to turn to him. He shows mercy and grace. He offers an opportunity for change and for being made whole. So, in a time of silence, let us examine ourselves before him in worship and, through confession and thanksgiving, find renewal and true hope. *[Allow time of silence.]* Amen.

Prayer for today

Jesus, our suffering Saviour, as we remember, both in sorrow and in rejoicing, your death upon the cross, we remember too those who stood at the foot of the cross, witnessing your afflictions – Mary your mother, John your beloved disciple, Mary Magdalene and the other women who supported you. We recognise that at times life is very tough in so many different ways. Sometimes life is overwhelming and we feel we cannot go on alone. Help us, your people, to stand together in sadness and difficulty, to lighten one another's burdens, to reduce isolation and to provide comfort to those in need. Reassure us by the power and presence of your Holy Spirit. We ask this in your healing name. Amen.

Prayer for equipping

Where humility is in short supply, God grant us servant hearts,

As we seek to be followers of Christ.

Where many live in the darkness of injustice, God make us beacons of hope,

As we seek to bring the light of Christ.

Where we encounter barriers and stagnation, God make us channels of positive change,

As we seek to share your transforming love.

Where there is division and dissention, God make us communities of blessing,

As we seek to restore your harmony and peace.

Amen.

Closing prayer

Forgiving Lord, you call us to forgive and to do good to those who wrong us. Please help us to always be open to the empowering of your Holy Spirit, so that we will set out to serve you this week not in our own strength alone but totally reliant on you. Fill us with your love and truth. Amen.

2. Suggested songs

- 'When darkness deepens' ('Here with me') by Tim Hughes et al. (2015)
worshiptogether.com/songs/here-with-me-tim-hughes/
- 'Christ be in my waking' by Stuart Townend and Simon Brading (2011)
youtube.com/watch?v=X4emGI1gHPA
- 'All the room was hushed and still' ('Love each other') by Graham Kendrick (2009)
youtube.com/watch?v=2MblrWZDpPQ
- 'When we were in the darkest night' ('God of our yesterdays') by Matt Redman (2008)
youtube.com/watch?v=oKyuL8vHpXU

3. Suggested video clip

A short introductory video of words, images and musical reflection offering a general understanding of forgiveness.

youtube.com/watch?v=MUCNd2XkPDA



WEEK SIX: GIVING OUR BEST WHEN IT HURTS

→ Key idea

When hurt, we leave justice in the hands of our righteous God, and follow Jesus' example, showing love to those who don't deserve it.

→ Key Bible feature

Romans 12: 17-20

Love in Action

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my 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:

'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'

Key sermon framework

Introduction

This is where the chapter gets really tough. Last week we touched on blessing those who persecute us, but now Paul expands on this idea and addresses the very real feelings and temptations that can arise when we are the victims of other people's wrong actions.

Living as followers of Jesus does not provide immunity from trouble. Paul tells us this in 2 Timothy 3:12:

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

But it's how we handle unjust treatment that is important.

These verses warn us against taking justice into our own hands – Paul is not saying that wrongdoing isn't punishable by law. The following chapter, Romans 13, is clear that we are all *subject to the governing authorities* (v. 1) that are necessary in society for security and rehabilitation; instead these verses warn us about taking *personal* revenge.

Integrity

Verse 17 is about living in complete integrity. It might seem conflicting for Paul to instruct us here to do good

not only in the eyes of God but also in those of people – surely if God knows that we're doing right then that's all that matters? But this isn't about bending to other people's will or being liked. It's about making sure we are beyond reproach. People may not like us but still be able to recognise the integrity of our actions.

This is not about doing good deeds in order to be praised or admired, like the Pharisees; this is about displaying God's goodness [*shining*] among them like stars in the sky (Philippians 2:15) through a life well lived, and so drawing people to him. Paul highlights this in Titus 2:9–10:

Teach slaves to... show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive.

When we follow God's laws with such goodness and love, people around us can't help but notice. And loving our enemies is the most radical way we can demonstrate that our capacity for goodness has a supernatural source.

In the original Greek, the words that are translated 'be careful' have connotations of planning and meditating beforehand. This is necessary to avoid being caught off guard and repaying evil with evil. If we have already reflected on and prayed about how we want to conduct ourselves, we will be less likely to act in the heat of the moment, following our emotions.

The right choice

Sometimes provocation can be extreme.

In 1 Samuel 24:5, Saul and his men were hunting David down in an attempt to kill him. When the tables were turned and David found Saul isolated and vulnerable, he resisted the calls to kill Saul and said this to him:

'This day you have seen with your own eyes how the Lord gave you into my hands in the cave. Some urged me to kill you, but I spared you; I said, "I will not lay my hand on my lord, because he is the Lord's anointed." See, my father, look at this piece of your robe in my hand! I cut off the corner of your robe but did not kill you. See that there is nothing in my hand to indicate that I am guilty of wrongdoing or rebellion. I have not wronged you, but you are hunting me down to take my life. May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you. As the old saying goes, "From evildoers come evil deeds," so my hand will not touch you.'

(1 Samuel 24:10–13)

Even though all the circumstances would have made it easy for David to retaliate and take Saul's life, David chose peace over revenge. Peace is a choice: *as far as it depends on us*.

Resist revenge

In Psalm 37:37–38 David himself writes:

Consider the blameless, observe the upright; a future awaits those who seek peace. But all sinners will be destroyed; there will be no future for the wicked.

The reason we can pursue peace despite the injustice of a situation is that we know that God will work everything out in his perfect justice in the end.

Judgement and punishment are not our duty as individuals – as humans we will only ever have limited knowledge of a situation whereas God knows the secrets of all hearts (Psalm 44:21) and is the only one who can truly judge justly. Where we act out of passionate resentment towards those who have hurt us, God acts out of his perfect knowledge. Who are we to take such a responsibility into our own hands?

Earlier in Psalm 37 (v. 7) David writes:

Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes.

Sin often has its natural consequences in this life, and we may see our persecutors suffer the consequences of their actions. But if not we wait with patience, trusting that God will resolve it all at the final judgement. We know that God is abundantly patient with all of us (2 Peter 3:9), which is great news for us when we consider our own mistakes – but it also means that he is patient with those who have hurt us. He does not wish suffering on them but wants them to come to repentance too.

Following Jesus' example

However, we are not called to some kind of *schadenfreude* (taking pleasure from another's troubles), waiting in anticipation for God to punish those who hurt us. We are called to positive action and, in doing so, we will *heap burning coals* on the head of our enemy. This is slightly strange imagery for us to understand, but it certainly sounds like a painful outcome. It could be a metaphor based on the way that burning coals were used to melt metals. In the same way, doing good to those who hurt us will melt their hardened hearts and, hopefully, bring them to repentance and peace towards us. Remorse is a painful emotion to experience.

A different interpretation is to do with generosity. If your fire went out you would go to your neighbour, who would give you burning coals from their hearth, which you'd carry in a brazier on your head back home. If they *heaped* the coals, i.e. gave you plenty, they were being particularly generous.

When we do good to our enemies, we are following the words and actions of Jesus. God's kindness to us is intended to bring us to repentance (Romans 2:4) and Jesus teaches on this topic in the Sermon on the Mount:

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? (Matthew 5:44–46)

As fellow sinners, we are in no place to judge another person, *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* (Romans 3:23).

Application

What this could mean for us...

This is tough stuff. What it asks us to do is to go against our natural instinct to 'do unto others as they do unto you'. What we're being asked to do instead is to lean on our understanding of God's justice and mercy and draw from that. What does that look like? Forgiveness instead of resentment; kindness instead of cruelty; words of encouragement instead of ridicule.

Let's not underestimate how difficult this is; it may require a radical change on our part. Acknowledging the hurt may be the first step before forgiveness can follow. If forgiveness feels like too big a leap, first pray to want to forgive, and focus on the forgiveness that Jesus has offered you. We will look at this in a bit more detail next week.

This week, 40acts is all about giving when it hurts. This is giving which costs – in all sorts of ways. It can be daunting, making us take a deep breath or think 'I can't do that'. But whatever it is, remember that Jesus did it first – he gave everything for us.

Additional resources

1. Additional linked verses

Matthew 5:43–47



2. Prayers

Opening declaration

Philippians 2: 14–16 Do everything without grumbling or arguing so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. Then you will shine like stars as you hold on to the word of life.

And all the people said, Amen. Amen.

Prayer of confession

Jesus, Lamb of God and redeemer of our sins, have mercy upon us and forgive us when we have chosen to take personal revenge on those who have hurt us or have taken pleasure in another person's trouble. Refine us, melt our cold and hardened hearts and bring us to repentance and peace. Help us to know that when we do good to those who do us harm, we are following your words and your example.

Jesus, Lamb of God and redeemer of our sins, we pray today for those who are involved in maintaining law and justice in our nation. We recognise that we are all subject to the governing authorities that exist to bring us safety, security and rehabilitation. Give wisdom and integrity to all law-givers and law-sustainers and to those who seek to bring justice when laws are broken and when punishments and deterrents are handed out. We ask for your wisdom and compassion, in your precious name. Amen.

Prayer for today

Jesus, our defender and our judge, help us to follow the example of David who, even though he was in circumstances where he could so easily have retaliated and taken King Saul's life, chose instead the way of peace over revenge. Help us to acknowledge that peace is always a choice in as far as it depends on us. In all situations of injustice, may we be confident that God's will is at work to bring about perfect justice in the end. Amen.

Putting on love (based on Colossians 3)

You are God's chosen people, holy and supremely loved.

So clothe yourselves with gentleness, with humility and with patience.

Above all put on love.

Let love bind us together in perfect unity.

Show tolerance to one another and forgive your hurts. Know that the Lord has forgiven you with grace, with endurance and with kindness.

Above all put on love.

Let love bind us together in perfect unity.

Let Christ's peace rule in your hearts and as you sing hymns and spiritual songs, let your hearts be filled with compassion, with contentment and with joy.

Above all put on love.

Let love bind us together in perfect unity.

Closing prayer

May the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon us; may the grace of God grant us grace to live lives of complete integrity and to be beyond reproach; may the love of God fill our lives and reach out to others, this day and every day. Amen.

3. Suggested songs

- 'From him, through him and to him are all things' ('Greater') by Ben Fielding et al. (2014)
worshiptogether.com/songs/greater/
- 'From the thankful heart' ('We still believe') by Kathryn Scott (2010)
youtube.com/watch?v=W94M_CvBEQM
- 'I will give my whole self to you, Lord' ('I worship you now') by Marc James and James Helling (2010)
youtube.com/watch?v=kbc1uK1t5Es
- 'At the cross, where Jesus suffered' ('Merciful') by Graham Kendrick (2009)
youtube.com/watch?v=qo1YRI-ea2o

4. Suggested video clip

A short but moving video clip with music, live images and words showing different signs of hurt and of forgiveness.

youtube.com/watch?v=FxoMbpWuk0I



WEEK SEVEN: GIVING OUR BEST WITH OUR WHOLE LIVES

→ Key idea

Jesus has given us the power to overcome evil in the world around us. When we do good we fight that battle and display his love.

→ Key Bible feature

Romans 12: 21

Love in Action

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Key sermon framework

Introduction

It's the final week of the 40acts challenge and the end of our series looking at chapter 12 of Romans. Next week we will be focusing on Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday and celebrating his resurrection on Easter Day.

As we began to see last week, there is a transformation that goes on when we repay evil with good. Retaliation creates a vicious circle, but when we react to evil with blessing and kindness it starves the flame of anger to fuel it. Rather than trying to 'outdo' evil, we take away its power to overcome us – we in turn overcome it.

As we also discovered, following this teaching can be costly and may feel 'beyond' us. The only way to cope with this struggle is to look to our saviour's example, and reflect on what he did for us. Jesus' life and death are the ultimate illustration for us that good conquers evil. He went through the utmost evil on the cross. He was whipped, jeered at, spat at, stripped. Compare Isaiah 50:6:

I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.

Abandoned by his friends; separated even from his Father in heaven. He faced it all without fighting back, with perfect patience and kindness, praying for his persecutors – dying an undeserved death in place of us. But that was not the end. Evil and death were defeated because, as we'll celebrate on Easter Day, he came back to life.

Going deeper

For some of us, the word 'evil' may seem extreme; something that we associate with terrible things that we see on the news, like the awful images from the war in Syria. But it's much broader and more prevalent than that, and something that we have to battle to 'conquer' (which is the word used instead of *overcome* in some translations). Paul explains this further in his letter to the Ephesians, 6:12:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

If we're followers of Jesus, not only will we battle with our old sinful natures, but also the devil is at work, wanting to turn us away from God. However, we never need to fear because we know that the power we have in Jesus is so much greater than anything the devil can throw at us, as Paul reminds us in 2 Timothy 1:7:

For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

We have the same power living in us that raised Christ from the dead (Ephesians 1:19–20)! If we fully grasp that, we don't have to worry about the devil's schemes. And the best demonstration we can give of the power of the gospel is when we act with goodness in the face of opposition.

Jesus' victory over death encourages us in the knowledge that we can conquer all that we might face in this life, because, no matter what, we have that promise. A few chapters earlier, in Romans 8:37–39, Paul famously writes:

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In practice

It can be really, really tough to act with kindness and generosity, especially in circumstances where a truly atrocious evil has taken place. If you are facing any kind of situation where evil appears to have the upper hand, to be told to simply do good in return can sound trite and simplistic. In desperate situations, all we sometimes have is the knowledge of Jesus' love for us to get us through. That's why we have to cling to what is good (Romans 12:9), as we saw a few weeks ago. Paul is not preaching

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anything to us that he hasn't himself experienced – he suffered many hardships and imprisonments in his ministry. The Bible doesn't tell us how he died, but it was probably a martyr's death. There may be times when our own sufferings make us feel far from God, but when we fill ourselves up with his truth, we can receive comfort.

Some of us may be familiar with the story of the missionary couple Jim and Elisabeth Elliot. The two of them travelled out to Ecuador with a team of other Christian missionaries in order to make contact with an unreached people group – the Huaorani tribe. They had begun to establish friendly relations with them, when Jim, along with four of the other men, was brutally killed. It might have been expected that Elisabeth, as a young widow with a baby girl, would seek revenge, or give up and fly home. Instead, she stayed, driven by the desire that the Huaorani people would know the saving love of Jesus. She did not see the fruit immediately, but eventually, after resumed contact, the men who killed her husband came to know Jesus and to become leaders amongst the first Christians there.

It takes extreme courage not just to overlook and avoid reacting to evil but to actually counteract it with good. The Elliots' story demonstrates that we may not always see an immediate breakthrough but if we persevere in patience and kindness it can't help but have some effect on our enemies.

Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew 16:24–25:

'Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.'

To be able to pay back good for evil requires real sacrifice. It's putting to death our natural desires, which is a daily struggle and something that we can only do with God's help.

There are two important elements in the Elliots' story: attitude of mind and forgiveness.

- **Our minds**

In the first week of this series on Romans 12 we looked at renewing our minds – taking on the battle there first. Paul also teaches on this in Ephesians 4:22–24:

You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Just because we know Jesus, it doesn't mean we will automatically respond as we should. It needs our participation: a putting on of our new selves. Paul points to the *attitude of our minds* specifically. Our thoughts are affected by what we dwell on. A good place to start might be reading through those verses in Isaiah about what Jesus faced for our sakes. By renewing our thinking we then affect our actions.

- **Forgiveness**

Forgiveness is not just for the sake of the perpetrator but for our sake too. Unforgiveness has been shown to be detrimental to our physical health, with some medics considering it as severe as a disease.

And we know that in God's eyes there is no limit on the amount of goodness we should show, and no point where a line is to be drawn. Peter asks Jesus about this in Matthew 18:

Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, 'Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.'

The idea here is that it's not just a greater number of times than we would expect but that, as seven is the number that represents completeness in the Bible, when multiplied it represents an infinite number. At some point in all of our lives, we'll have faced a situation where we had to forgive. And where the hurt is deep-rooted, it is not a one-time conclusion but a continual process of deciding to forgive again and again, despite our feelings.

Counteracting evil with good takes the burden from our shoulders and is the most poignant way we can grow in grace and become more like Jesus, because we know that there is nothing that we can do that isn't covered by his death on the cross. His forgiveness is deep enough for all our sins.

Application

What this could mean for us...

In the last couple of weeks we have focused on verses that are the most challenging to put into practice but are the most effective at showing Jesus to others. This is the spirit of 40acts – not that it's just 'nice' to do good things to those around us when we feel like it, but that in doing so we are actually overcoming evil. In living a generous life we are conquering both our own self-centredness and the powers of evil that Paul speaks about. Each small act is an expression of a commitment to a generous life.



What impact has doing 40acts made on your life? For some of us it will have been a refresher and perhaps an encouragement to keep on being generous. For others of us this might have been the start of a shift in mindset and lifestyle – it's worth considering whether there's anything you want to become a habit. Take a while to consider how you can build radical generosity into your life beyond the challenge.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he encourages him to turn away from all the evil that surrounds him and to live differently:

But you, man of God, flee from all this, and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith.
(1 Timothy 6:11–12)

Even in our small acts of goodness, we are pursuing God and fighting the good fight.

Every time we act with generosity, and especially when we do so as a response to evil, we display Jesus to those around us. Has anyone noticed your acts and been intrigued? Use it as an opportunity to talk about our generous God.

Additional resources

1. Prayers

Opening declaration

Ephesians 1:18–19 I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead.

Lord, open our eyes and our hearts afresh today, we ask you. Amen.

Quiet reflection activity and confession

Prepare in advance sufficient paper crosses and pens for one each for everyone in the congregation and distribute either before the service or at an appropriate moment before beginning this activity. Baskets will also be needed to collect the crosses.

Invite people to consider in silence the matters that are burdening them and weighing them down, and to choose one and write it on the cross. Then ask them to choose one thing that is creating a barrier between them and the Lord Jesus and to write that on the cross too. Then invite them to put the crosses in the baskets as they come to them.

As the baskets are received, pray aloud: Jesus said, 'Come to me all you that are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.' Know in your hearts today Christ's healing, forgiveness and peace.

Prayer for today

Ever-present Lord, as we conclude our studies and reflections on 40acts and Lent draws to a close, prepare us to retrace the road to Jerusalem as Easter comes near. Help us, through what we have learnt from the example and words of the apostle Paul and others who have shown great courage in their witness, to live out our faith whatever the circumstances. Help us to cling and hold steadfastly to the knowledge of your love for us and to know just how costly that was to God the Father, who still shares in the sufferings of a broken world. We ask this in the power of the Holy Spirit, who is still at work to bring the whole of creation to its full salvation. Amen.

2. Suggested songs

- 'Higher than the mountains that I face' ('One things remains') by Brian Johnson et al. (2010) [youtube.com/watch?v=6_KXsMCJqBQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6_KXsMCJqBQ)
- 'Sing on the battlefield' by Kathryn Scott (2014?) [youtube.com/watch?v=2yTEWs_rPUM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yTEWs_rPUM)
- 'Though I walk through waters' ('Refuge') by Vicky Beeching (2009) [youtube.com/watch?v=STDY0OPQKPM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=STDY0OPQKPM)
- 'Lord we have seen' ('Shine') by Matt Redman (2006) [youtube.com/watch?v=0SrPqkEnhOA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SrPqkEnhOA)

3. Suggested video clip

A short thought-provoking cartoon clip with words and music on the value of carrying our cross each day and the shortcuts we are sometimes tempted to take to avoid this.

[youtube.com/watch?v=PdGnEo9FS4g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdGnEo9FS4g)



Acknowledgements

Author

Catherine Durant

Additional resources

Marie Birkinshaw

Editors

Fiona Mearns

Debbie Wright

With thanks to Antony Billington, Head of Theology at LICC.

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