

God's Word to Tertiary Students

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Romans 12:1 & 2

Some of our young people are about to leave or have already left town and home this week to pursue tertiary studies. Others are arriving here in Palmerston North for the first time or are returning to continue their studies. They are also entering another phase in the 'university of life', new opportunities and experiences, a new independence from family and their local community where they are known. It is a time of shaping their own attitudes, thoughts, values and beliefs. It's an exciting time as well as a scary one.

Universities were originally set up to be places where students studied the whole field of current knowledge, all the subjects of major importance; so that scholars were trained in literature, philosophy, science, music and religion. Many of the great scholars were in fact multi-gifted people. Universities were places to discover the truth about the world, life and God; places to study God's world. But in the last few centuries we've seen many social changes: the questioning of all of society's authorities, the growth of science as an alternative explanation of life from religion, and the explosion of knowledge and information. These factors have led to a more secular western society and more secular universities, where a more specialist, rather than general education is offered. However tertiary campuses are still a place to seek truth, where one's own ideas will be questioned, challenged and rubbished. It is a place, a time, to develop one's own ideas, meaning and purpose in life.

I remember my own experience of beginning university in Wellington. It was a huge place, a huge number of people, and it was during the Vietnam War. The student leadership was as strongly anti the U.S.A. as it was pro-Communism, especially the Chinese communism of Mao Tse Tung. There were strong views, weird views and lifestyles, anti-Christian views. I remember a Special General Meeting called by the Students' Association, who moved a motion to ban the Christian Union from the university campus altogether. After an hour's debate the motion failed. So I experienced some threat to 'where I was at.' Most of all, it was an opportunity to think through what and why I believed, to find my own purpose in life, or rather, to find God's purpose for me. I found the friendship of Christian students very helpful and supportive in my own search.

Today I want to answer the question:

What would I say to the young people from and within our church family who are doing tertiary study? And I trust that what I share will be encouraging to those of us who aren't.

I want to speak from Paul's words to the Romans, chapter 12 verses 1 and 2.

1. Firstly Paul says, "God is good."

Verse one reads, "Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy to usà." (NIV) "because of God's great mercy I appeal to youà" (GNB) "Dear friends, God is Good. So I beg youà." (CEV)

If you have grown up in Christian families, this is what you have learned in your families and church; that God is good and loving, that his purposes for us are good, and that above all things, God wants a relationship with us. God said, through the prophet Jeremiah, to the people of Israel, who had failed Him repeatedly and were now in captivity in the foreign city of Babylon, "I know the plans I have for

you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." These are the very things many young people cannot see for themselves - no future, no hope.

But God is good. God's greatest desire is for a relationship with us, as his friends and followers. In Psalm 139, the writer speaks of this God who created us and knows us from the womb, who loves us and offers us friendship, in darkness and light, in hard and good times, in the saddest and best moments. We cannot escape God, Psalm 139 says, and no situation is too dark, too desperate, too shameful, too sinful, for God to be there with us and for us.

God is good and wants the best for us. Earlier in this letter to the Romans are Paul's famous words, "We know that in all things God works for good with those who love Him." In case you think that Paul is being naïve about God's goodness, he goes on to say what situations cannot separate us from God's love, and he's very specific and realistic about what life can throw at us: trouble, hardship or persecution, hunger, poverty, danger and death. Paul had personal experience of all of these, but still he could say, "nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God is good. How do we know? Because of Jesus Christ, who left His heavenly home to share our world and our lives. Because God put his love to the test in the crucifixion of his only son, and has continued to love.

2. Paul says, "God is good, so I beg you, offer yourselves/your bodies as a living sacrifice to God."

The Jews knew all about sacrifices, offering the best animals on the Temple altar regularly, as sacrifices for their sins. But they were dead sacrifices! Paul says we are to be living sacrifices, you'll be pleased to hear; offering our best, all that we are to God, living in the way that pleases God day by day. This idea of living sacrifices was staggering to Jews. We are to be living sacrifices for Jesus, which will involve some pain and cost, some sacrifice of putting to death each day whatever is not pleasing to God in our thoughts, behaviours, attitudes, feelings and decisions.

"Offer your bodies," says Paul. If living sacrifices were staggering to the Jews, then this was staggering to the Greeks, who thought of their bodies as unspiritual, weak, decaying, sinful, even evil; the prison-house of the soul. To them, it did not matter what they did with or to the body. Their aim was, through spiritual discipline, enlightenment and understanding, to help their souls escape from the body into a higher spiritual realm. But this is not the Christian view. We are to offer our bodies, minds and hearts, all that we are to God. It is not just belief in God that is important but also how we live out our belief in our bodies, unlike some other major religions. The best summary of Jesus' greatest commandment is "Love God with everything you've got!" Paul also said, "You are the temples of the Holy Spirit"; the outward reflects the inward. God wants all of us to love and serve Him and not to divide ourselves up; not to compartmentalise our lives, giving the spiritual parts to God and keeping the other parts under our own control.

The Crusades of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were an awful time in Christian history. The King and noblemen of England, along with other Christian monarchs of Europe, decided to recapture the Holy Land and especially Jerusalem, which were occupied by Moslem peoples. They wanted to preserve the important Christian sites of Jesus' life for posterity and for Christian pilgrimage. Although well intentioned, the Kings and the Churches of Christian Europe recruited a huge army of so-called 'Christian' men to go on a series of military crusades. Apart from the battlefield bloodshed, other terrible atrocities were committed in the name of Christ en route across Europe, including the pillaging

and destruction of uncooperative towns and villages and the rape and murder of those who would not be baptised as Christians.

Many of the crusaders were not genuine Christians but were simply mercenaries wanting to fight, or criminals and 'sinners' to whom the Church granted forgiveness if they joined the crusade. All the crusaders had to be baptised as Christians and so there were many mass baptisms before people could join up. But many mercenaries when being baptised, held their sword arms above the water because they refused to surrender their swords and fighting arms to Christ. Is it any wonder there were such appalling and violent atrocities committed?

We cannot live as genuine Christians if we wish to surrender only part of our life to Jesus and keep control of the rest. Whether it is 50% or 15% or even 5% that we retain control of, it will not work but will lead to divided loyalties and inner turmoil. As someone has put it well, "If Jesus cannot be Lord of all, he cannot be Lord at all!"

I recall very clearly my own first months at university. I attended an Easter Camp where I decided that although I was a Christian, I was living my life in compartments. I was taking part in church activities on Sunday and leading the youth group on the weekend, but during the rest of my week of university life I was not really serving Jesus. I was not trying to integrate my faith with my studies. I decided at the Easter camp that I wanted to be a full-time, whole-hearted follower of Jesus. I wanted to prove my loyalty to Jesus in some way.

This was in the early seventies at the time of the Jesus movement and Jesus marches, when many young people throughout the world, and especially hippie-types in the USA were becoming Christians. It was the time of 'One Way Jesus' badges and bumper stickers. So I decided that to prove my new commitment to Jesus, I would wear a big 'One Way Jesus' badge on my chest around university for the rest of that year. Now I mentioned earlier, that life on the university campus was not that sympathetic to Christians, but this was going to be my personal response to the Lord at that time. I still remember arriving at my first lecture on the first day back after Easter. I came into a crowded lecture theatre of about 300 students and coming in at the front with the whole tiered lecture room looking down at me. To make matters worse, there in the front row were some of my former seventh form classmates who all turned to say hi. And one girl looked at me in horror and called out in a voice that seemed loud enough for the whole lecture room to hear, "Are you one of those Jesus freaks Steve?" I replied, as casually as I could, "Yes I am." "That's fine", she said and carried on her conversation. And would you believe, that was the only negative comment that I got all year! "Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God", says Paul. How do we do that?

3. Paul goes on to say, "Do not be conformed to this world."

I love the J.B. Phillips version of this verse which reads, "Do not let the world squeeze you into its mould." The Message version says, "Do not become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinkingà.dragging you down to its level of immaturity."

The biggest threat to young people, the best device of the Evil One to spoil lives, is to use the culture around us, to use peer pressure, to use advertising and social change to have a slow, gentle, yet powerful influence on us for bad. University is an opportunity to try new things but you don't have to try something to know it's bad. One doesn't have to experience apartheid, a Nazi concentration camp, a drunk driving accident, an unwanted pregnancy, gambling, seances or drugs, to know that they are bad for you. We can see the results and talk to those who have been involved with these things.

The Message version goes on to say, "Instead fix your attention on God. You will be changed from the inside out." Other versions say, "but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind." (G.N.B.) and "but let God change the way you think." (C.E.V.) and "but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." (N.I.V.)

The way to develop a renewed mind is through regular Bible reading and prayer, reading Christian books and regular participation in a Christian community - a cell group or housegroup:

- to get to know God's character and purposes
- to let God shape your mind and heart

Our church here offers those opportunities to students and there are also Christian meetings and cell groups on tertiary campuses.

Don't just wait for God to pop a Bible verse into your mind. Don't use the Bible as a fortune-telling agent as someone once did. He wanted to know God's guidance about a particular situation so he shut his eyes, opened the Bible to a random place, put his finger on a verse and read, "Judas went out and hanged himself." Not convinced, he tried again, opening the Bible and pointed his finger. He read, "Go then and do likewise." He tried one last time, "whatever thou doest, do it quickly.

Students, do not let the world squeeze you into its mould, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."

4. Finally Paul says, "Thenà you will know the will of God for your life."

Discovering God's will is not about finding a blue print, map, plan, or guide book for your life. It's knowing God, and discovering what pleases God and how God wants us to live. I recall this story:

A man wanted to know God's will for his life and so took a piece of paper to an empty church and wrote down what he wanted to do for God and put it on the Communion table and waited for God to comment. Nothing happened for a long time. Finally he felt God saying, "Screw up the paper, get another blank piece and sign your name on the bottom. Then place it on the Communion table and offer it to me. I'll help[you fill it in as we go through life together. Knowing God's will is about knowing God well!

Let me finish with this question. Is God the STEERING wheel or the SPARE wheel in your life? One makes discovering God's will so much easier.

As you begin or continue your exploration of God's world, and as the rest of us engage in the responsibilities and relationships of this week, remember Paul's words. "God is good. Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice to God..do not be conformed to the ways of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by the renewal of your mind...THEN you will know the will of God for your life." This is our prayer for each of you as you continue this new adventure in your life's journey.