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How should we Worship God?

The apostle Paul had been systematically explaining the gospel of salvation when he suddenly paused in wonderment, as though overtaken by the magnificence of God's grace and mercy towards fallen humanity. He had glimpsed the end of God's purpose, the salvation of all those who respond to God's invitation and choose to be saved, when he concluded that:

“God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counsellor?’ ‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen” (Romans 11:32-36).

For Paul this was an expression of worship and praise to Almighty God. It was his way of saying how much he appreciated what God had done and was doing – and his words seem quite spontaneous. When we stop to consider what God is offering us by way of salvation, we too might be overtaken with feelings of appreciation and deep gratitude. But, in Old Testament times, whilst God was pleased when His people praised Him spontaneously from receptive hearts and minds, He did not leave worship of Him to such individual gestures from His people. God knew the minds and hearts of His people – as He knows us today. He knows that without some structure and discipline in our worship and praise of Him, our feelings are more likely to turn towards pleasing ourselves than towards pleasing Him – as they did in Israel in past times.

❖ Spiritual Worship

In the final part of his Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul turns his attention towards the way we should worship God and starts where he had left off at the end of Romans chapter 8. Chapters 9-11 were a digression by the apostle about God's longstanding purpose with the Jewish people. For you could read on from Romans 8:39 to 12:1 without noticing any break in the apostle's thought. Like this:

“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 ... I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 8:38,39; 12:1).

Because of all that God has done and is doing for them, baptized believers should want to live for Him and surrender their lives in His service. It should be our aim to live a holy life, which is what God will find acceptable, and that will constitute “*spiritual worship*”. Sometimes, when there is doubt about how best to translate the original language in which a Scripture was first given the translator may offer an alternative rendering. This is one such case, where the ESV also suggests “*which is your rational service*”.¹

We are certainly expected to make a heartfelt response to all that God has done for us; anything less would be ungrateful. It is also perfectly reasonable for God to expect us to want to live in a way that pleases Him if we really want to become members of His family and spend eternity with Him and with other members of His family, including the Lord Jesus Christ. So how do we do it? The apostle now explains that we have to get our minds right with God. In Romans chapter 8, Paul talked about the need to develop “*the mind of the Spirit*” (8:5,6); now he explains a little more

¹ Here the Amplified Bible has both possible renderings and it suggests: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, and beg of you in view of [all] the mercies of God, to make a decisive dedication of your bodies [presenting all your members and faculties] as a living sacrifice, holy (devoted, consecrated) and well pleasing to God, which is your reasonable (rational, intelligent) service and spiritual worship.”

what that involves:

*“Do not be conformed to this world, but **be transformed by the renewal of your mind**, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2).*

❖ Spiritual Transformation

The two things have to go together. If we want transformed bodies – made like that of the Lord Jesus, being free from sin and death – then our minds must be transformed, and that process starts now! By understanding the Bible and by making it our lifelong guide and companion, we can change the way we think. It shows us how to have a relationship with God and Jesus and teaches us how to learn to live with them and relate to them in prayer.

Once that relationship is established we will begin to alter the way we behave. We will come to learn what pleases God, as we have been doing in this book, and then we will begin to want to do it. This change will not come overnight: it takes time to cultivate – to develop a new attitude and a different set of desires from those with which we were born. Changing the way we think and feel is something we should be doing together with other believers. Paul says that together believers form the body of Christ:

“We, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another” (Romans 12:5).

We have taken it for granted so far in our studies that there was a Christian congregation in Rome to which Paul was writing. His letter was addressed to *“all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints” (1:7)*. The word *“saint”* in Scripture means people who are “set apart” from the world and worldly ideas. They have chosen to serve God, and have made an agreement with Him through their involvement in the work of Christ. In Rome they were the people who believed what Paul believed and taught: it was their understanding and acceptance of the gospel that justified them in God’s sight and made them sharers of the one true faith.

It is the same today. Only those who believe the gospel as Paul taught it are members of the true church. As we have seen, there are many people who believe and teach

wrong things about God’s purpose;² they are not members of the true church, for their teachings are man-made and not God-given. It is vitally important to transform the mind by believing the truth as God has revealed it. Human reasoning is useless for that purpose. What matters first is to *understand* and then to *do* the will of God.

❖ Christian Congregations

The writer of this book is a Christadelphian. He belongs to a group of people who have from earliest times sought to rediscover exactly what the Bible teaches. This community was established in the 19th century and its founder members all sought to practise what we have been learning to do – to read the Bible for themselves and then do what God requires of them. There are now Christadelphian³ congregations⁴ in most parts of the world and we can put you in touch with your nearest group if you write to the address given at the back of this book. Sometimes, of course, you may be the first believer in your locality, in which case we can help and support your spiritual development while you are teaching others in the locality. For this is what the apostle now says to the Roman believers that they should do. They should work together to build one another up.

Notice that Paul doesn’t write to the *clergy* at the Church of Rome, as though they were the only ones who would understand what he was saying. He wrote to *“all those ... who are loved by God” (1:7)*. The early Christians did not have professional teachers or priests. All the believers worked together and contributed to the spiritual development of their congregation as they were able. For God

² *Some of the wrong teachings we have considered were about the immortality of the soul; heaven-going at death; hell as a place of torment; the existence and power of a supernatural Devil or Satan; the existence of demons; the denial of the Unity of God; confusion about the nature and work of the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit – the power of God; and not believing that baptism by immersion is essential for salvation. In all these things Christendom in general is astray from the Bible.*

³ *The word Christadelphian means ‘Brothers in Christ’ – a phrase we meet in Colossians 1:2.*

⁴ *To remain Bible-based and to distinguish themselves from Christian churches that have strayed far away from true Bible teaching, Christadelphians call their congregations “ecclesias”, this being the Greek word for “congregations”. They believe that people are the really important thing, not the “church” building itself.*

had called them all to be holy; as the apostle Peter expresses it:

“You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1 Peter 2:9,10).

All members of the congregation were to be holy and were to work together to worship God. So Paul tells the Romans that they should see what they can contribute:

“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” (Romans 12:6-8).

Everybody has something to give, says the apostle, and that is as true now as it was when he first wrote those words. When we are able to understand the Bible we can do a great deal to help others who also are learning, and this is a wonderful way of growing together and developing spiritually as we prepare for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ.

❖ Congregational Worship

Paul does not spend time in this letter explaining how worship should be arranged, but he does this in other letters. For example, in his letters to the believers at Corinth he deals with problems they were having in their communal worship. It is something to watch out for as you are reading the Bible, to see how congregations (or “ecclesias”) were organised in the First Century and to note that there are a lot of differences from the organisational structure that exists in some churches today.

The early church had overseers, elders and deacons, but those terms described a simple arrangement in which some members of the congregation were appointed to look after arrangements, to care for the sick and needy and to make sure that matters were organised properly. The entire con-

gregation had similar responsibilities, for all the members were to love and care for one another. The notion of paid clergy with different layers of responsibility and importance is not a New Testament idea at all.⁵ It is another of those things that got incorporated from the way other non-Christian religions had organised their affairs, and it can have more to do with business planning and career development than with the House of God. The Lord Jesus was very strongly opposed to such matters, as he once demonstrated in spectacular fashion when he overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple at Jerusalem (Matthew 21:12,13).

We have a priest in heaven – the Lord Jesus Christ, who sits at the right hand of the Father and who is our go-between. We have no need of earthly priests. For if they were to be appointed they would distance the believer from his or her direct contact with God through Christ. The writer to the Hebrews, who wrote to people who were used to such an arrangement, explained carefully why priests are no longer appropriate. The Lord Jesus Christ, he explains, is now the only priest we need.

In First Century times there were people who had Holy Spirit gifts and they were able to speak as prophets, including in foreign languages, or interpreting such languages. Those gifts have now passed, having served their purpose, but even in those times it was possible for a congregation to become disorganised or over-excited, so Paul wrote about such matters at length to the Corinthians.⁶ We should not seek to be over-emotional or to get over-excited in our worship, but should use the time to sing hymns, to read from God’s Word, to pray together and to listen to an exposition of God’s Word. There is so much to learn and so much encouragement that we can give one another that we will greatly benefit from such times and are encouraged to meet together regularly. This is what the writer to the

⁵ To read about church organisation you might want to look at 1 Timothy 3:1-13; 5:17-19 and Titus 1:5-9. Christadelphians have no paid ministers or missionaries: all the work is done voluntarily and the congregations are self-financing. Sometimes there are funds to help new meetings get established and to deal with welfare needs. Members contribute towards these various funds if they are able to, but non-members are never asked to contribute any money.

⁶ Paul’s advice about how the First Century believers were to exercise their Holy Spirit gifts is in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14.

Hebrews said:

“Since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (Hebrews 10:21-25).

❖ Preachers and Teachers

There is one Scriptural requirement, not observed nowadays in many churches, concerning those who are to teach and preach in a congregation when there are both men and women present. Because of what happened in Eden, the apostle Paul explains that it is men who are now charged with the responsibility of public teaching from God’s Word.⁷

“Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor” (1 Timothy 2:11-14).

This does not preclude women teaching children, or from speaking when there are only other women present, but it shows that the legacy of Eden is far-reaching and will not be wholly resolved until the Lord Jesus comes again. Nor does it limit the role that women can play in the Christian community; it merely defines that role as excluding public speaking in mixed assemblies. In the last chapter of Romans Paul sends personal greetings to those members of the congregation he already knew and nine out of the twenty six persons greeted by name are women. We know that from their names. Four of the nine are described as prominent in the work of the congregation at Rome. For example, it is said of Priscilla (or Prisca) that she is Paul’s “fellow-worker” and of Phoebe that they were to give her whatever help she needed “for she has been a patron of

⁷ See also 1 Corinthians 14:34,35.

many and of myself as well” (16:2). So there is evidently plenty for everyone to do in the Lord’s service, whether we are men or women.

When baptized believers meet together to worship week-by-week, they are to remember the Lord Jesus Christ. So the exposition of God’s Word should always be helpful in that respect and should direct the minds of those present towards some aspect of Christian discipleship. Early believers broke with the Jewish practice of meeting on a Saturday – Sabbath keeping by the Jews began at sunset on Friday and ended at sunset on Saturday. Jesus rose on the first day of the week and, to celebrate that great victory over sin and death, Sunday morning marked the start of the day when believers met together to remember Jesus.⁸

❖ The Breaking of Bread

Jesus commanded that baptized believers should remember the death and resurrection of their Lord by sharing together some bread and wine, just as he and his disciples did at the Last Supper. This act is described in the New Testament as the Breaking of Bread, or sometimes as an act of communion (the word simply means fellowship or sharing together); and the bread and wine are symbols of the body and blood of the Lord. They are not his actual body and blood – that is another of those pagan ideas that some people have wrongly taught and believed. And this act is to be done, as a matter of commandment, by all the believers, not by a select few, and both bread and wine should be shared. Scripture is quite clear about that:

*“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, **we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread**” (1 Corinthians 10:16,17);*

“For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he

⁸ See John 20:1; Acts 20:7 and 1 Corinthians 16:2. As Paul explains in Colossians 2:16, any day will do in which to remember Jesus and in some parts of the world work-practices make it easier for believers to meet on a Friday or a Saturday.

broke it, and said, ‘This is my body which is for you. **Do this in remembrance of me.**’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood.

Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. **Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup”** (11:23-28).



Ideally, of course, it is an act of remembrance to be undertaken with fellow baptized believers. Where there are unbaptized people present they would not share the bread and wine, for it is the closest expression there is that the partaker is in covenant relationship with God and that, week-by-week, that covenant is renewed in this way. It is a sharing together of the love of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

❖ “Love one another”

When Jesus instituted this meal in remembrance of himself, he shared it with his disciples. He began by telling them how important it was that they should love one another and he washed their feet to show that he was among them as somebody who had come to serve. Paul, who has just written to the Romans about the “one body” of Christian believers, now stresses the importance of living the new life that began at baptism. In chapter 7 he spoke of it in terms of a fierce struggle to overcome; in chapter 8 of the development of a spiritual mind, so that our thinking is right. Now he turns his attention to what our conduct should be towards one another, believers and unbelievers alike:

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honour. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in

hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another” (Romans 12:9-16).

Believers should live together as befits members of the family of God: that’s why Paul writes about “*brotherly affection*”. It is a great thing that Jesus is happy to call all new members of God’s family his brothers and sisters.⁹ We should be careful for the material and spiritual needs of all our fellow believers, and should live in a way which supports and builds up one another. If we have more than we personally need, we should contribute to the needs of others. For this reason it is usual to have a collection at those meetings when believers are together remembering Jesus, but not at public meetings when the gospel is being preached. For whilst Jesus said that “*It is more blessed to give than to receive*” (Acts 20:35), he also said “*You received without paying; give without pay*” (Matthew 10:8).

❖ Christian Behaviour

The way we behave – with believers and unbelievers alike – is a very important expression of the change that has taken, or is taking, place inside us. For the things we say and do are outside indicators of our inner state of mind. We have to try to live a transformed life, as though we had stopped living for ourselves and are now living entirely for others as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is what Paul means by living sacrificially – putting the needs and feelings of others before our own.

There are two reasons for this. The first is that we are commanded to do this as followers of the Lord Jesus Christ, because that is how he lived. In a masterful understatement, Paul says this:

*“We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbour for his good, to build him up. **For Christ did not please himself**”* (Rom 15:1-3).

⁹ “He is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Hebrews 2:11) and that is why Christadelphians are so called, for the name comes from Greek words which mean “brothers in Christ”.

Jesus set the standard and we have to do the best we can to follow his example. We will not achieve the same level of obedience, of course, for the Lord was perfect in everything he did. He never once sinned. But we have to try hard to follow his lead. Just what that means in practice is explained here (in Romans chapters 12-15), and by the Lord Jesus himself in the long talk he gave to his disciples, recorded in Matthew chapters 5-7, sometimes called the Sermon on the Mount. Paul's encouragement to the believers at Rome is closely modelled on what Jesus taught. For example, he says that we should not retaliate when people do unfair or unreasonable things to us, but should suffer wrong for Christ's sake:

"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17-21).

In these verses Paul gives us the second reason why we should try to live just as Jesus did. We need to live in a way that encourages other people to want to know about Jesus, so that they too can believe the gospel and be saved. The greatest good we can do to anyone is to share with them the faith that saves from eternal death. This is why Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans, so that they too would know what he believed and benefit from that knowledge. His gift to us, centuries later, is priceless; for without this knowledge we could not obtain eternal life. Now it becomes our responsibility to share that faith with others – and how we live is a vital part of that sharing.

❖ In Relationships

The apostle Peter wrote about partners in a marriage where only one of them was a believer and this is what he advised:

"Likewise, wives, be subject to your own husbands, so that even if some do not obey the word, they may be won

without a word by the conduct of their wives – when they see your respectful and pure conduct. Do not let your adorning be external – the braiding of hair, the wearing of gold, or the putting on of clothing – but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (1 Peter 3:1-4).

Again it was a question of the outward behaviour of the believer being such that it would influence for good those with whom the believer lived, whether husband, wife or children. Quite what that involves today depends greatly upon individual circumstances. Perhaps only one brother or sister in a house is able to read easily. In such a case he or she can help the others to learn to read the Bible and can give helpful advice from it. In other cases husband and wife might have different opinions. Perhaps one is strongly opposed to religion, or wants to do things which are not in accord with the teachings of Jesus. There might be some hard choices then that have to be made. But in the first place at least the believer must seek to live in accordance with the life of Christ – to be honourable in behaviour, to live at peace, to be respectful and pure in conduct, and to cultivate a gentle and quiet spirit.

We will look at what the Bible says about marriage later. For the moment it is important to note that both the apostles Peter and Paul say that we should respect and work for a demanding employer with just the same attitude of mind as if we were in a difficult marriage. For the working relationship is another opportunity to demonstrate to others that we have changed our thinking and our behaviour. It gives us the discipline that we sometimes need to make sure that we are putting into practice Christian values and attitudes. So if people are unfair to us, we will not be unfair back, but will return their unkindness with kindness. And if things are hard, it is an opportunity for us to remember just how hard things were for the Lord Jesus.

❖ New Life in Christ

None of this is easy of course and you may be wondering how you could possibly keep it up, even if you started living in this way. It seems an impossible standard to achieve. It is exactly for this reason that the apostle structured his letter in the way he has done. Think how you would have

responded if in the opening chapter of this book you had been challenged to live like this – to be nice to people who are nasty; to love those who hate you; to pray for those who treat you badly. You would probably not even have finished that first chapter!

But all through the opening part of the letter Paul was busy telling us about the purpose of God – what God has done to make salvation possible, how much we need it, and how it will all come together when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven to establish God's kingdom on earth. We have seen that God is at work in the world and that He wants us to be part of His great purpose. In the middle of his explanation the apostle said that we can join that purpose by believing and being baptized into the saving name of Jesus. Then he started to explain what that means inside our minds as we begin to change the way we think and become focused on spiritual things.

It is only now, towards the end of the letter, that he spells out what this will be like as we start to live differently – as our new life in Christ is shown to other people. He started this section by reminding us that the driving force of that transformation is the mind; that it needs to be transformed every day as we understand more fully what God's will involves. We need to keep in constant touch with God through Christ. These are the things which will enable us to start to live like this – like Jesus – and these are the ways in which that new life can be sustained. Here they are again:

“Be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2);

“Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer” (12:11,12).

❖ **Renewing the Mind**

The Bible is going to be our guidebook and companion along life's journey and it will help to mould and shape our thinking and our feelings. It does not merely change our mind about things – as this book might have changed your mind about the things you believe as you have been reading. The Bible *renews* our mind. The more we read it, the

more we understand about God and His purpose and the more we shall want to be part of that purpose, whatever the personal cost. It is a life-giving Word from God which is quite unlike any other book you might read. Because the Bible comprises a large and complicated collection of books, it takes time fully to understand it, and there are endless avenues to explore. It is meant to be a life-long study for the man and woman of God.

But it is a two-way process when we start to learn about God and want to get to know Him more and more. This is why Paul says we should be persistent in prayer. He means that we should keep praying. Prayer is our opportunity to talk to God and to tell Him how we are feeling about things. We can thank Him for all He is doing in our lives; ask Him for help and guidance and praise Him. When we become baptized believers we can pray for forgiveness to a Father who is always ready to help and to forgive when we fail. For it is not only in the act of baptism that our sins are forgiven. When, after baptism, we fail to achieve the sort of behaviour at which we are aiming, as we all do, then God is ready to forgive us through our Lord Jesus Christ and to help us to keep going forward in our next attempt:

“My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments” (1 John 2:1-3).

There are commandments to be kept as part of our new life in Christ and we will gradually become more obedient and more faithful if we are striving to live as followers of Jesus. Over time we will see a change taking place and, at the coming of Christ, it will be completed by the transformation of our bodies.

❖ **Transfiguration**

There was an event in the life of Jesus when he had climbed a mountain with three of his disciples and there he was transfigured before them. The gospel accounts say that he was completely transformed: *“he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light” (Matthew 17:2).* For the disciples

and for the Lord it was a glimpse of what things will be like in God's kingdom, when all our present problems will be completely removed and we will begin life at a higher level in every respect.

When Paul asks us to be "*transformed by the renewal of your mind*" (Romans 12:2), the word "*transformed*" is the same Greek word as that translated "*transfigured*" in Matthew's account of the transfiguration of Jesus. Just as Jesus was transformed, so we are to be changed inwardly so that, in due course and in the mercy of God, we too can be changed outwardly to be just like Jesus. When we resolve to follow Christ we are beginning to live a completely new life: we have started a life that will never end if we remain faithful and become obedient children in God's heavenly family.

Things to Read

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- Read Ephesians chapter 5 to see the practical way the apostle Paul addresses the changes that have to take place in our lives.
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- Galatians chapters 5 and 6 show us how our lives should change inwardly and outwardly. It is a regular feature of the apostle Paul's letters that he deals first with what we should believe and then with the change of behaviour that must follow.
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Questions to Think About

- 25.1 What is the driving force of the new life in Christ and how will we be able to keep up a good standard of behaviour as we try to follow the example set by Jesus? (John 13:34; Romans 12:10; Ephesians 5:2; Colossians 3:14; 1 Thessalonians 4:9)
- 25.2 How should we pray to God? What will make our prayers effective in His sight? (Luke 18:1; Matthew 6:6-7; 7:7; 26:41; Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6)