

Alright, we have gathered here in Rome, Italy. Some of us are from Antioch. Some of us are from Jerusalem. Some of us may be from the churches in Judea and Galilee, but most of you who have any Christian experience previously have come out of a Gentile church—even if you're Jewish—a Gentile church that has been greatly influenced by, or raised up by, Paul of Tarsus. Now, Paul is getting on in life, and if you will read the very closing words of this book, he says, "Pray for me. I'm going to Jerusalem and pray that God will rescue me from those people down there trying to kill me." Paul has a deep, profound sense that he may not be alive three months from the penning of this letter. Everybody's told him he's facing almost certain death. So, this is his swan song.

Now, he doesn't know that half the books he will write have not yet been written, but half of them have been. Most of the letters he'll write after this, by the way, are quite brief. This is his great statement. This is the biggest, most complete statement he'll ever make. Let me go a little bit further. Do we know what Paul preached when he went to those first Galatian churches? Do we have any idea what his message was? Tell me. Do we? Wouldn't the book of Galatians tell you a little bit of what he preached? Absolutely not. No, absolutely not. That book's covering stuff he left out. If he had said that, he wouldn't have had to say it. He was not expecting Judaizers. Okay, First and Second Thessalonians; isn't that what Paul had preached in Thessalonica? Absolutely no. They got off on a tangent about something he just mentioned one day, and he has to come back with two letters to get them straightened out. Somebody went off on a tangent on the Second Coming.

This is the other side of the coin. Someone said reading the epistles is like listening to one half of a telephone conversation, and trying to find out what Paul preached to churches is virtually impossible. It's never recorded. And we always remember it... "Paul said this and that to the churches." No, he didn't. This is what he had to come back and say later because he left it out. If you're going to find out what Paul said when he preached to the churches, you have to read the book of Romans, because this is to a group he may never see, and he's seeking to deliver his message. Are you following? Now, maybe there are a couple of other books—but only a couple of other books in the New Testament—that are of the things Paul would have said in churches as he raised them up, but this is what he preached to a church about the Lord, salvation, and the Lord when he came in. This is a condensation of his ministry.

By the way, it's very typical of all his letters. The first half is glory, and the second half is practical—and they don't ever match. Boy, he's telling you that you are unindictable. He opens with 1 Corinthians—you're unindictable, you're saints, you're holy ones, you're this, you're that, and Romans 1 through 8—you know, God is for you, God is for you; you can't be any better off than you are. Then he gets over into the practical realm. Philippians—just incredible. Now, at the bottom, he says to two sisters, "Please stop fighting with one another." Ephesians: there's nothing more glorious in the world, and then he has to come down to the end and say, "Children, for goodness' sake, mind your mothers and daddies." And that's what the letter to the Romans is.

Now then, I want you to imagine this older gentleman. In fact, he's just about my age, which means he's got six years left—no, he's got about ten years left to live. I don't know how many I've got, but he will...if this is written in 56 A.D. and he has until 64 A.D. to live, how many years does he have left? He's got eight more years to live. He doesn't know that. He's sitting there thinking about all those churches that he's raised up. He's in Corinth, which is a great pain in the neck, and all the ugly, terrible things that have happened between Christians fighting with one another—are you following me?—and then he thinks about all the ugly things he had to deal with in Thessalonica, and all the things that happened in the four churches in Galatia. He thinks about all the headaches he's had in Antioch, and maybe Berea, and in Ephesus, and all the little churches there, and the ugly way Christians behave and what they do. I would like to just sit down beside Paul and say, "Yeah, amen, uh-huh. Doggone their hides. Well, they behave where we can get your work done, Lord." But Christians are a pain. Ask Moses. Forty years—he's going to go from here to here. Forty years. It should take forty days. This is how he got there: going in circles. Then he got there, and only two got across. Left with a million, and two made it. Yeah, Christians are a pain. Say amen. You live with them, you know they are a pain. Think about them; they are so ornery. Say amen again.

So, Paul thinks about all the things he's seeing Christians mess up with, and he has this five-chapter exhortation—sorry, four-chapter exhortation—and I've inverted it to find out what it is he has faced throughout all his years. I'm going to tell you what Christians do, and this is what you people in Rome, Italy, either have done or are going to do. I don't want to depress you, but we're going to go through the whole thing. And then, by the way, tomorrow night I won't be speaking. We have the night off, but I understand most of you will be back tomorrow night. Is that right? No, no? Just a few? Okay, something is happening here tomorrow night. It's just for the privileged elites. You and I can't come.

I'm going to have to do something tonight, you will rarely ever, ever see me do—I'm going to use notes. You are such terrible people that I cannot remember all the ugly things you do. I've had to take notes so I wouldn't leave anything out. Isn't that unbelievable? Now, some of you just got saved. "Gene, leave me alone. I just got here. I'm an Italian. I don't know who these people are. I don't know who Paul is. Leave me alone." Others of you are supposed to be great Christians like Priscilla and Aquila, but I'm telling you, this letter is there to remind you of the frailties of human beings. This is reality. Here it is. This is hard reality among Christians living in community, and those of you who are sitting down in front of your little video machines (your computers or phones) right now—you see, when you get up on Sunday morning and dress your kids and go to church and sit there for an hour and come home, you don't ever get to realize how bad all those people are sitting in a place in the church. They've got on perfume; it's covering up their body odor. They all have on clean clothes that just came from the cleaners. You don't know that what happened to you happened to everyone of them getting to church. Don't you remember? "You kids get ready; we're going to be late for church! Honey, why in the world didn't you sweep out the car? The car's so dirty, the kids are going to get dirty just getting in it. I can't find my Bible!" "What do you mean

you don't want to go to Sunday school? You're going to go to Sunday school or the devil will get you!" That's what going to church is like. Good boy, when you hit the front door, it's, "Praise God!"

And halfway through the sermon, you think, "Did I light the fire under the roast? Did I turn it up too high?" "Did I set the timer? Will I have a home when I get..." And those people have it so lucky; check in on Sunday, maybe if they're really committed, check in on Wednesday. You're living with one another, my goodness. You don't bathe when you go to church on Sunday morning. There's no perfume on you. Your clothes aren't dressy, and from there it goes straight down. You know what it's like. That's church life. That's the reality of it, and some of you are foolish enough to want it. You ought to have your head examined. This is where you discover the enormous weakness of mankind: in the fellowship of the body of Christ. It's a place where most Christians cannot survive, and I'm not throwing flowers at you because I don't know if you're going to survive. Shoot, anybody can survive when they're in their teens and twenties. Write me a letter when you hit fifty. Tell me if you've lived in church life until you're fifty — I'll send you a bouquet of roses. I will, I will. Well, you've got kids and grandkids, and tell me all about how you handled it.

Alright, Italians and those who have come from the ends of the Roman Empire, are you ready to hear either what you've done, what you're doing, or what you're going to do? Are you ready? These are the problems. The rest of the week, we'll try to find some solutions. I hate to do this to people I love, especially at this wonderful meeting tonight, but here we go.

Some of you here in this room think that you are more important than you really are in the kingdom of God. And that's not all; you let us know. You exude to the rest of us that you are better, are more important than the rest of us. You can put on that air, and you can make us know that that's how you feel. Another one is that some of you in this room just over-function to the point that it is disconcerting. You are a member of the body of Christ, but you are doing a solo performance. You over-function in your place in the church. By the way, anytime any of you want to say amen, please do so. Now, I'm not here to condemn you; I'm just trying to get you ready for what to expect in the life of the church. This is not my stuff, and don't any of you say, "Gee, Gene came to see us, and he talked about such gross things." No, Paul of Tarsus did this. I didn't do this. Hey, brother, I was born and raised in Ephesians, Colossians, and all those glorious places. This is Paul of Tarsus. Get provoked with him, not me. I'm just telling you what he said.

Okay, some of you, because you can prophesy, you overstep prophecy and get to meddling around in other areas. Some of you who serve think that because you're doing such a great job of serving, that gives you some latitude with others, to get into their life and tell them what they should do. Some of you who teach do more than teach, and some of you who exhort go a little bit beyond exhorting. You have the gift to exhort, but you press the points. Now, some of you give, but you have begun to complain about giving. And some of you are in authority, but you're doing it very sloppily, and you are not doing it with thoughtfulness for the other person. Some of you are very, very merciful, but you have been merciful so long that you have lost mercy, and now it's just a show. Right?

Some of you have a dark side. There is one or two or three of you in here who even have pernicious evil. This is the Scripture - not pernicious anemia, but pernicious evil, and you have turned loose from good, and you are enjoying evil. Others of you...some of you in this room here tonight...you're very loving, but it's just because the Bible tells you to. It's two-faced. It's not really genuine. Well, if this doesn't get you down in the dumps, nothing will. There are a few of you, I don't know which one of you it is, but there are a few of you who feel that others in this room are inferior, certainly inferior to you. There are one or two others of you in here who, when you serve the Lord, you do it on the low burner. You do it just as close to lazy as you can. You are lazy in your spirit. Alright, are you still here?

Would you like to interrupt me at any time and say something? Feel free to. Would you? Say, "Hey, that's my roommate." Here's a really dangerous one: the Christian here in the fellowship in Rome, Italy, who has lost the eternals and is living in the now; "now" is all-important to him or to her. His future, her future, hope in Christ means nothing. That which causes most of us to get through the mess we're in is the sight of things to come, but this person has given up that sight and is living in the here and now — right here, right now — caught up in that. There are some of you who are suffering, but finally, for the first time in your life, you have suffered in the past, and you have suffered well, but this time you are rejecting suffering. "No way am I going to put up with this. I've put up with this before. I've gone to the cross before, but this is it — no more. I'm through. I've got a few things to say to you people. I'm sick and tired of the way I've been treated. No longer." You're rejecting suffering.

You people look so sad. I can't imagine why. (laughter) One or two of you have just about quit praying. Some of you were very, very helpful. You just got tired of helping other Christians. They always seem to need help; you just quit. "Let the bums suffer. I am tired of helping these brothers and sisters." You what, huh? Okay, alright. Is that the way they're treating you right now? One or two of you here were given to hospitality that would just make a king feel royal, but you were hospitable to Joe, and then Jack, and then Pete, and then George, then Mac, then Harry, then Larry, then Curly, then Moe, and they took advantage of you, and you're tired of sleeping on the sofa and cooking meals for bums. You have opened your house fifteen, twenty, thirty times this year, and by George, "I'm not going to do it anymore;" you have given up hospitality. "Let them stay somewhere else. I'm tired of this." Or it's more like this: "Well, let me go talk to my husband. I don't think he's going to be up to this." Or "Let me go talk to my wife. She's really getting tired of this." You have lost hospitality.

Are you there? Let's see how many of you would fess up to that one. Anybody who would raise their hand and say, "I don't know." We got one. Actually, we got two — mine and yours. Two people in here who've worn out hospitality, and only two? I'm not at this time, but boy, I tell you, there have been times in my life that the doorbell rang one more time, somebody with his bedroll, and I was going to shoot him.

There has been a lot of persecution in the churches Paul has written to and raised up, and there's going to be a lot in Rome; perhaps there has already been a little, and some of you have just gotten

tired of putting up with your persecutors, and you're getting just downright angry at them. In fact, a few days ago, when you were walking through the streets rejoicing in the Lord, somebody threw water on you, and then the garbage, boy, you turned around and you just plain threw a fit. You are no longer putting up with your persecutors. You are getting angry with them.

Okay. I don't know exactly how to describe this, but maybe you'll recognize it: brothers and sisters who are rejoicing. "Oh, praise the Lord, praise the Lord." And you're kind of looking at them and saying, "Boy, I'm getting tired of listening to these people with joy. I'm tired of seeing people with joy." Some other dear Christian comes by with a problem; he's just sitting there crying. "This is the worst thing that happened to me." You look at them and say, "I'm so sick and tired of seeing Christians burdened. I just don't care, buddy; that's your problem, not mine." Church life — Rome, Italy, 56 A.D. Church life — North America, all the way through the year 2000. That's right, and on and on and on and on. It was true in the Dark Ages, the Middle Ages, the Modern Ages, and in the years and millennia to come until the Lord Jesus comes and gets this thing. It'll just stay this way, saints. I think I'd like for you to know it's not ever going to get much better. You're going to live here.

I will sometime this week talk to you about the greatest single mistake Gene Edwards has ever made in the ministry, and it has to do with the fact that I don't think I've always understood that it really doesn't get any better. I'm talking to you about things that will be here with you till the day you die. You can get all the people in this room completely cured, but when Joe Schmo walks through that door and joins you, it's going to start all over again. It just never stops. They're going to, sure as the world, if anybody even comes to my funeral, I'm sure there's going to be a fight over, "I don't want to carry that coffin out to the..." There will be a fight over my coffin. I'm going to pull the lid open and say, "You young dumb single brothers, shut up and get this thing going."

Some in every fellowship of believers work at causing disharmony. There is always someone who feels there must be a minority view. We're all in agreement, right? I'm not so sure I agree with this. I had an experience as a teacher. I always taught the scourge of the world. I started teaching in a ghetto and went down from there. Well, it was horrible, but I went from there to teaching the mentally retarded and the learning disabled. I have always taught the eighth grade. That is the worst grade; everybody in education will agree if they've ever been through it. It is the worst grade to teach. And I didn't teach eighth grade in good neighborhoods. I taught either in the slums, or I taught kids who...what they did is they used my classroom as a dumping ground for all the troublemakers. I had a situation once when I was teaching in the ghetto in which the one kid, the one incorrigible kid in the room, got transferred out. Wow. About two or four days later, I noticed something unbelievable; there was another kid in that room who took his place. Interestingly enough, and this is a true story, that kid moved. I thought I had died and gone to heaven. I had gotten rid of the two biggest troublemakers that I had in that classroom, and about four or five days passed, and somebody took their place, and it never got any better. I could have shot half the kids in that room, and somebody in that room will feel that he or she has to have and give to the group a minority view. Now, I'm going to someday gather together a group of people who are all psychopathically optimistic, and I'm not

going to let anybody else join except these people. You know, I'm afraid one will turn sour, get cured, get well, and turn sour. I used to be optimistic my whole life, and I got cured. Some of you who come from the better parts of the neighborhoods of Rome, Italy, do not like being thrown in with the poor and the beggarly, and you're just a little too good for some people. Now, I don't know how that fits in with Chicago. Do they have a class lower than the Puerto Ricans? (laughter)

Well, I didn't know if you were going to handle that or not. I really seriously discussed with myself whether or not I'd pull that on you. You could have easily said, "Yeah, the Anglo-Saxons." Oh, I'm glad we got past that, saints. Oh boy, what a relief to get over that one. Wow.

I think everybody who lives on this earth, no matter where they are, feels that there's somewhere in society around them somebody who is classed lower than they are. Did you know that? It is said of Italy, and this is a modern-day saying, that the northern Italians look down on the southern Italians. Southern Italians look down on people from Sicily. Now, if you get down to Sicily, there's no place to look down on, but the truth of the matter is, the northern Italians, the southern Italians, and the Sicilians all looked down on the people from Rome. So the question is, who do the Romans look down on? And the answer is, the French. Who do the French look down on? That's right; absolutely everybody. Always, always, there is that feeling that I'm better than somebody; well, you're not. Don't ever forget that your Lord was born in a barn, and don't ever forget that the poor are His favorites. Even the Cubans, brother. The church ought to always have an outreach to the worst of society, even if it's in Beverly Hills or someplace like that.

There are a few of you who are just drunk on, just really intoxicated with your wisdom. You really see yourself as extremely wise, and you think you're wiser than most people. Now, I don't know about your group here, but I have lived with a group of people from another nation and another culture that trades in wisdom, and I really have seen this driven home - those who really are wise, just feeling that wisdom is everything and they've got it all. Alright, some of you are very drunk in your own wisdom.

Now, here are some really cute ones. Some of you have not only given up on the persecutors, but you've just gotten down to the point that you're taking revenge on anybody who hurts you. You've just gotten downright, out-and-out vengeful. It's going to be an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. It's going to be a broken glass for a broken glass. It's going to be an ugly word for an ugly word. It's going to be a flat tire for a flat tire. It's going to be an empty tank of gasoline for an empty tank of gasoline. And on it goes. Some of you...your conduct has reached the point that your conduct is not even acceptable in the eyes of the heathen and the unbeliever. That's when things really get serious. Let me tell you, the most serious thing is when a Christian begins to conduct himself in a way that even the world finds unacceptable. That's pretty heavy. That's serious. That's getting down serious, and that's not just in drunkenness and immorality; that's in ethics. Yeah, well, I'll just leave it there with ethics. Some of you have gotten to the point of saying, "That was so ugly and dirty, what he did, and I'm really afraid God's not going to punish him for it, so by George, I'm going to punish him." Some of you have some enemies, and you have said, "Let him starve. Let him die

of thirst. I just enjoy sitting right here and watching that guy die of thirst and starve to death. I want to know that he suffered; I want to watch him suffer, and I'll make him suffer." Some of you can't identify with that. Wait till the next time your roommate makes you mad.

Then there is that brother or sister here in the room who, every time they go through a hard period in their life, they sink. Sink. "Where is God?" "I lost my faith." "There is no hope. Somebody tell me there's a God. Paul, I know it's three o'clock in the morning, but please — is there really a God?" You do not know how to overwhelm that which is wrong in your life; you are only overwhelmed. You have never overwhelmed. You only get overwhelmed.

Okay, and we're moving right along here. Here's something that you may really not be able to identify with at all, and yet I will tell you that some of what is said here was literally new to the world. Today it makes perfect sense, but in that day, this was new stuff, right hot off the griddle. This is the new ethics that people had never heard before. Some of you are just naturally at war with secular authority. You don't like secular authority. You break the law. When you see a policeman, you're afraid. What you don't fear, unfortunately, is that you don't fear God's judgment. You don't fear the judgment of God, but you fear a policeman. There is a criminal element in the church. Will you hear me? There is, right here, right now, today, a criminal element in the church, and if that is not true, it will be true tomorrow.

Furthermore, when you get caught, you really get mad about it. "Why don't you go pick on somebody else?" I had two very interesting experiences in my life when I watched this kind of conduct right in front of me, and in both cases, I was out-and-out scared. I don't remember the occasion, but I had driven from Texas to California, and we were in a van, driving night and day. I had been driving at this particular time, and we stopped to get gasoline — probably in New Mexico, in one of those forsaken places where there is almost never anything, and you're so grateful when there's a service station to get gasoline. I mean, you can drive a hundred, a hundred-fifty miles, and see nothing but tumbleweeds. There was nothing but sand. I got the gas and drove out to the road that led to the freeway. We got off, pulled right out of the service station, and it dead-ended. You could go that way if you're going north, or that way east, or that way if you're going west, and there was a stop sign. I could see the day after tomorrow in that direction. I could see next Sunday in that direction. There was nothing. The jackrabbits were not even out. There was nothing. I got to the stop sign, and I almost stopped, but it was about five o'clock in the morning. I was tired and bleary-eyed, and I didn't stop. I make no apologies for it; I just almost stopped.

The policeman had been there at the service station, I guess getting gasoline, until he pulled up right behind me and pulled me over. I thought it was a little much. I really did. One of the brothers in the car threw a fit at that policeman. He went into a blind rage, and I could see myself in Sing Sing the rest of my life. On another occasion, which happens fairly frequently, I got stopped at customs between the United States and Canada, and I knew there was nothing that we had. We had no contraband, and there was nothing wrong with it. They were very suspicious of something, and I had no idea what it was, and there was a young lady in the car, and she got so mad at those

people. Let me tell you something: don't ever show anger at customs officials. They have more power than Julius Caesar did. I mean, their power is totally unlimited. They can do anything with you in the world. They've got more power than any other law enforcement people on this earth.

What happened was, it turned out it was hers. There was a fur coat she had purchased at a flea market, and she got it for just a few dollars, but he thought it was new, and he thought she was trying to get past customs without paying for it. She was just giving this man a fit, and I thought, "Well, ten years from now, I'll still be eating beans and writing my life," and he's telling her to have patience and, "I'll be out one of these days." I learned something, and that is that there are people, I didn't know this, who really have a belligerent attitude toward uniformed authority. I will tell you what I want to ask you to do: will you please never come join a church that I am a member of? Because if you do that with the secular authority, you will surely do it with the brothers and sisters in the Church of Jesus Christ.

I just got off the subject, didn't I? I didn't mean to stop preaching. Now then, some of you are beating the government out of taxes. Hmm. You know, I'm just going to be honest with you here, and maybe we should turn the TV off for this, but I think every American in America has the feeling that he probably is. Do you understand what I'm saying? You turn it in; you don't really want them to have your money anyway. Is that not true? You don't do this with a great deal of joy. Has anybody here ever said, "Hi, I'm going to pay my taxes"? I don't think you do that. We all kind of wonder, "I wonder if I put it all down there." So, this would make all of us kind of squeamish, but then there are those who are working hard at beating the government out of taxes. You're here in this room, and either you or someone like you does not pay your bills. I know there are some of you.

I once got stuck with a \$650 telephone bill to Brazil. Now, I want to tell you something. I have traveled in this world, but I don't know a living soul in Brazil. "\$650 telephone bill to Brazil!" That will really make you impatient with Christians. That will really make you impatient with Christians. Some of you just really feel that you don't need to pay your bills. Have you ever gotten two of something you ordered in the mail, and they only charged you for one? And did you ever feel like, "Hot dog and hallelujah!" That's another kind of not paying a bill; that's just plain beating somebody out of things. You don't pay your taxes. You don't pay customs. You don't give honor to those to whom honor is due, and you do not give fear to those to whom fear is due, and you don't give to the Lord and His work; or if you do, you do it in a grudging way. I have some stories to tell about this, the likes of which you have never heard in your life. We had a brother who did not tithe. The fact was, we were living in common; he kept his whole money, and I didn't think a whole lot about that. When we found out, we just forgave him and let it go, and that's all there was to it.

I'm going to scare the pants off of you. I want you to remember, we were living in common. Do you get that? And we were all putting all our money into one pot and living off it, while this brother kept his entire income. Does that remind you of anything? Does it? Well, I figured we were living under grace, and that would be the...well, you know...we just forgave him. We made him stop living in

common with us and forgave him. He did this for quite a long time. That brother died. He hung himself. Keep that in mind the next time you think about not tithing. (laughter)

Some of you are really deep in debt. I'll give you the name of one person in this room that's deeply in debt, and that's my wife's husband...if you ask my wife. If you ask me, we don't owe any money at all. So, a lot of this is relative or open to interpretation, but there are brothers and sisters who go so deep into debt that they cannot do anything. They live their whole life too far in debt.

A few of you are simply eaten up with hate. You just hate. You've got hate in your heart. Some of you simply have a long reputation of not being able to get along with anyone. I have always sent these people to Christian counselors; I'm not going to do that anymore. Some of you deliberately hurt other brothers and sisters just as deliberately as you can. Some of you have fallen asleep to the Christian life. You have forgotten how short life is, and in your conduct, you have failed to realize just how soon you are going to see the Lord. You have forgotten just how soon it's going to be before you see the Lord. By the way, it is soon, and I'm not talking about the second coming of Jesus Christ. There's nothing shorter on this planet than the seventy years God gives us on this earth. I didn't know that, but I'm passing it on to you.

Alright, some of you are holding on to the works of darkness. Now then, brothers and sisters, I'm coming to a list of things that are unlike anything else that's been given here. This is the first time the word "darkness" has been used. Once we ran across the word "evil," but here we have the word "darkness." The dark side. These are things that grace...I'm not going to say grace does not cover; that's not true, but these are things you can get kicked out of the church for. This is darkness. Okay, are you ready? You have, you are, or you will engage in orgies and carousing, drunkenness, immoral sex, oh, and all sex is immoral if it is not between a husband and a wife, and you abandon yourself to the lower things of your nature.

Now, the most interesting thing about this is the next two that get voted on. Now, we would all agree with orgies and carousing, wouldn't we? We don't know what "carousing" is, but it's something like an orgy, so that's good enough. You agree with that? That's a no-no, that's a no-no. Even the world can look self-righteous at that. Drunkenness...even television says, "Don't be a drunk." The television says very little, but you can find that in the little on television. Sexual immorality. Abandonment to your lower nature, but listen to the next ones—strife and jealousy. Isn't that interesting? Causing disharmony in the church and just out-and-out green-eyed monster jealousy. Jealousy of another brother or sister. Let me see. Ah, here this is going to go. If Stanley were to drive up next weekend, park right out here in front, in a Mercedes-Benz convertible that had been given to him, wouldn't you really praise the Lord for that? "I think so, brother. I really do. I really think so." I think you would eventually pay for that Mercedes-Benz in the lives of some of these brothers and sisters. I say that unequivocally and unapologetically. There are brothers and sisters here in Rome, Italy, who would not be able to handle your driving a gold-plated chariot.

Alright. Disunity and jealousy. Some of you have clothed yourselves with the world, and you are

making room for your sinful nature. You are feeding your cravings, and you're figuring out a way to gratify, feed, house, and bring along as your companion your flesh. Rather than denying it, you're treating it—wining it and dining it.

Some of you treat the weak brothers and sisters in the body differently than you do those who are strong, and you're more impatient with them than you are with ordinary people. Do you understand what I mean by "weak"? Alright, good. I'm glad I didn't have to say anything about that.

Some of you have a really bad habit of judging others by what your standard is of what a person should do to conduct their life. "You don't understand. These are my values; they're my values. Bother, you're just not living up to the right values. Now, I don't say *my* values, I just say *the right values*." I am judging everybody else by the standards I have set, and everybody is being judged. I have erected the standards of God—they are in my possession—and I will eventually insist that you adopt *my* standard of values. You have usurped the position of God in the house of the Lord.

Alright, some of you are a stumbling block by what you do and say to weaker Christians, and you don't care. You see them being hurt deeply by it, and you don't mind being a stumbling block. It just doesn't bother you a bit. But what you say and what you do causes others to stumble, and your conscience about this is seared, and you just don't care. Therefore, others are really being hurt by your conduct. Some of you think that it is *what you eat* and *what you drink* that pleases God. Some of you think that it is *what you do not eat* and *what you do not drink* that pleases God. I doubt you've ever heard it put that way; have you? That God is pleased by what you eat and what you drink, and God is displeased by what you do not eat and what you do not drink. You're looking at me like, "That surely couldn't be here." Well, I've got some news for you; Paul spent one and a half chapters on that subject. Can you believe that? Isn't that unbelievable? Some of you think that you please God by what you put in your mouth and chew on, or drink out of a cup, and that there are things that would displease Him based on what you chew on or drink out of a cup?

Alright, some of you just display a continuing spirit of disunity. Some of you Jews and Gentiles are fussing with one another. That's not going on here, is it? Excuse me, let's come to nineteen hundred whatever this is. The Jews and Gentiles here don't fuss with one another, do they? Now, why not? Why? Because you're all Gentiles. Let's find out if you are all Gentiles; let's see if we have this problem. Are you ready? Are there some of you who just feel like every day is just the same, and some of you who honor a certain day? Okay, we got past that one.

Do some of you really get into signs and wonders? Miracles, dreams, and visions? Nobody here in this whole group? Audience: *We gave it up for Lent.* (laughter) Okay, I don't believe this, but I'm going to prove it. Do some of you look down on people who are getting signs and wonders? Okay. Do some of you really enjoy learning a lot about the Bible and about things to come? And there are some of you who are really into...and have got all these big, thick books—all the lost books of the New Testament and the things that are to come. I know that. I know that Brother Rufus is really into that. As soon as I stepped into your home, I looked at this incredible library. He's got books in there

I wouldn't even attempt to understand." Do some of you look down on that, though? Well, I've got news for you—this room is full of Jews and Gentiles, because these are the conflicts between the Jews and the Gentiles. You don't have to be circumcised or uncircumcised to be a Jew or a Gentile. I'm sure none of you in this room are legalists. I'm absolutely sure of it. I'm sure that none of you are drunk on grace either—co-libertines in all that you do. No Jews and Gentiles in this room, and this keeps recurring—those of you who are dividers of the body. Now catch this: dividers of the body, a spirit of disunity, always those who are coming in with a minority and contentious view, and those who are filled with strife. Now that's appearing in four different chapters, and it's all the same thing.

Now there is one other person—and that is the person who (I don't know, you may not have this person in your church; if you do, don't look at him)—the natural flatterer. That one who flatters others. I don't know if you've got this person, but I would ask you this: *Can you be flattered?* It's just as bad to fall for it as to do it. We should not...I'm just telling you what you do; I didn't mean to exhort you here, but flattering other Christians is always for the purpose of influencing.

Now, brothers and sisters, I only have one thing to say to you: you're the most gosh-awful bunch of people I've ever stood in front of in my whole life. Just look at this - four pages! Four pages of nothing in the world but some of the worst stuff I've ever seen or read about. Even the heathen couldn't get along with folks like you. And the sad fact is—we're all this way. I've said to a group of Christians on several occasions, I said, "You've got a beautiful bunch of Christians living in community, and I'm telling you, you stand up there and look at them and know that you're looking at robbers and thieves. You're looking at wife beaters, husband beaters." That's right. "You're looking at homosexuals and lesbians, kleptomaniacs, compulsive liars...and those...those are your church leaders. That's telling the good side. (laughter) Yeah, those are the well-adjusted ones. Those are the ones who cause the least amount of trouble.

I tell you, brothers and sisters, the Church of Jesus Christ is psychotic. I want you to know that I used to have dark brown hair—almost black, darker than yours, but not quite as dark as yours. I had hair *up here*. And you know, you know who took it away from me? Christians stole it! Night and day, day and night, you poured peroxide on my hair and pulled out those hairs one at a time, until now, I'm old, wrinkled, gray, and bald. My brother has a full head of hair. My granddaddy died with every hair he ever had still on his head. I am the only bald member of my family. My brother's hair is still dark and beautiful, and you, Christians, have made me who I am today.

Audience member - "*Happens to the best of us!*" Get that man's name—I want him to be excommunicated! (laughter) Oh no!" It happens to the best of us. I think, brothers and sisters, I really think that step one in all of this is *acceptance*, and for each of us, our greatest strong point is always our greatest weakness, and our greatest weakness is not always our greatest weakness. I think every one of us feels he's strong somewhere; that's going to cause you trouble. None of us has any right to boast or to think of ourselves as higher than anyone else. Your time comes, and so does mine.

And that's true even of the most broken vessel of God. It seems that the most broken vessel of God, as he or she walks down the journey of life, one day the card turns over and they face something; this holy, holy person faces something that they absolutely cannot handle, in an area of their life they did not believe was vulnerable, or perhaps they didn't even know that area of their life existed.

You start off with a great deal of tolerance with one another. I wish that all Christians did live in community, and I'll tell you right now, there would be a lot fewer Christians. You're saying, "Gene, you want more people to go to hell?" No. I'm just telling you that we should never have gotten off on evangelism the way we did, evangelism outside the church or outside the community of believers. Are you following me at all? If evangelism had always been within the community of believers, most people would turn down the Christian faith. A lot of us just took out life insurance and went on our merry way. I don't know of anything on this earth more demanding than the church. It will take everything on earth you've got. It will test you again and again and again. And those of you who live in Rome, Italy—starting the day after tomorrow night—we're going to learn a little bit about how to live with one another. Not a lot—and there's no panacea. Let me warn you ahead of time, I can cure no diseases. The best we're going to do is what the British do—we're going to muddle through. That's the best we can do.

And if you feel—and please hear me very carefully—if you feel sometimes that this church, this gathering of God's people, is the worst place on earth to be because there's so much trouble and so many problems, it's only because you're seeing humanity in the plural rather than the singular. You are not unusually messed up. You do not have more homosexuals here than we have in Portland, Maine, Beverly Hills, or Dallas, Texas. You do not have more drunks and thieves here. All you've got is a look at a slice of humanity, which most people never get. Now, you know where you work? You know how much intrigue and politics are going on there, and how many people get hurt, and how many vicious folks there are? That's as close as most people ever get to looking at, getting a microscopic—no, a *microcosm* view. A microcosm slice of civilization.

In the church, in the gathering of God's people, you're thrown up against it. It's hard. It is also salvation, because here, more than any place else on earth, you can discover how dependent you need to be on Jesus Christ. And how tough life really is, because you're seeing humanity as it really is, everywhere. This is a record of mankind, and we Christians are only slightly better than the world, for only a few minutes longer. I'm going to run that sentence by again, because you might not have gotten it: we're only slightly better, and at that, only for a few minutes longer. I don't mean that we maintain being slightly better. I mean that we are slightly better for a few moments longer than they are, and that's nothing to boast about.

Alright, after this terribly depressing message, which we will entitle The Problems in the church in Rome. Problems in the church in Rome. Problems in the church in Chicago. Problems in the church anywhere on earth, in any century, in any city, and in any village. This is it. Now then, we have two choices. We'll see what brother Paul had to say about it. He didn't have a lot to say. He

had little to say. We can either choose this, or we'd better go hire about a half dozen of the best psychiatrists in America, or bail out completely of the church. Brothers and sisters, you're in the safest place on earth. You know where you are? You're in the place that God loves most on all the earth, and *that is where His bride gathers*. Praise the Lord