

12. Romans 12



Introduction to Romans 12:1 - 15:13

Faith for Paul, as for the whole of the Jewish tradition, is about the way we think. It is about what we know concerning God and ourselves in relation to God from God's self-revelation in creation and in human history. Faith is about our attitudes, and the choices which we make in our relationships with each other because of what God has revealed. There is a sense in which we can say that everything which Paul has written to this point has been in view of what he is about to say in this concluding section of his letter.

One reason for his writing will be discovered here, where it emerges that there are problems in the Christian community in Rome that endanger the very essence of the gospel.

There are problems in the way that different groups are failing to ‘welcome one another just as the Messiah welcomed you’ (15:7).

The problem is made even more serious in that it is affecting the relationship between Gentiles and Jews, both Christian and non-Christian. There is no issue that concerned Paul more than the issue of Jewish-Gentile communion in the one community of faith. He knew that the building and the maintenance of this communion was a matter of love, and it is to love that he now turns his attention.

This section is concerned directly with Christian behaviour. To this point Paul's focus has been on God's righteousness, especially on the way in which God has revealed his righteousness in Jesus. Now he wants to focus on the righteousness which God has offered to us through our communion with his Son. He has insisted from the beginning that God's gift of salvation requires from us the free acceptance which he calls 'faith'. Now he wants to look at what faith looks like when it is real, and the kind of fruit which we should expect in the life of one who has what Paul calls 'the one thing that counts', namely, 'faith working through love' (Galatians 5:6).

Everything Paul has written to this point has highlighted the central importance of faith. It is clear that faith involves an acceptance of grace from God; but, as he said in the Introduction, and as he will repeat in the conclusion, it is an acceptance of grace with a view to obedience. Having attracted all to Jesus, and having shown what God is offering through Jesus, Paul now concentrates on the way of life that should characterise a disciple of Jesus.

In introducing the theme of his letter, Paul included a quotation from the prophet Habakkuk: ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith’ (1:17). He wants now to examine what such a life involves. He has also said that what God has done for us in Jesus is so that ‘we too might walk in newness of life’ (6:4). He wants now to examine some key characteristics of this new way of life. If we truly have become ‘slaves of righteousness’ (6:18), how should we be living? Paul has demonstrated that righteousness is a divine gift, and that salvation comes through God’s gracious love. He has kept Jesus before our eyes – his faith, his obedience, his life-giving and his love-giving. He has insisted that it is the Spirit of the risen Christ that is offered to all as his redeeming and saving gift, and he has invited all to be led by the same Spirit that inspired Jesus (8:14), the Spirit who makes such living possible. As he wrote to the Galatians: ‘If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit’ (Galatians 5:25).

Morality is the fruit of God's liberating love: it is Christ living in us. It is impossible to live a moral life free from sin without this gift, even with the law. This gift is, however, offered to all, without distinction, Jew and Gentile alike. Paul does not argue like the Stoics for the logic of his positions, or attempt to show that they are inherently consistent. Nor does he present Christian morality as something that we can live by our own efforts so long as we are good-willed and rational. He invites people to faith. He invites people into the Christian community. He invites us to belong to Christ and to experience his indwelling Spirit. He shows what fruit can come from such a union, fruit that without such a union is quite impossible. He also points to behaviour that is inconsistent with living in the Spirit. His prayer is not for greater rationality and more responsible self-sufficiency, but that 'the power of Christ' (2Corinthians 12:9) may dwell in us so that our lives will be lives of 'righteousness'.

Before commencing our commentary on this section in which Paul focuses explicitly on the moral dimension of Christian living, let us revisit a number of Paul's statements in the sections which we have just examined. He has spoken of his mission as one of bringing about the 'obedience of faith' (1:5). He has spoken of God's kindness as in view of 'leading you to repentance' (2:4). He has asked: 'How can we who died to sin go on living in it?' (6:2). He has told us that we were baptised so that 'we might walk in newness of life' (6:4). 'You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus' (6:11). He has urged us: 'present your members to God as instruments of righteousness ... for you have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted' (6:13,17). We are to 'bear fruit for God' (7:4), 'serve in the new life of the Spirit' (7:6) and 'walk according to the Spirit' (8:4). He has assured us: 'If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live' (8:13). He is now ready to examine what this means.

One final introductory comment. As will become evident in chapter fourteen, there is one major issue that is concerning Paul and it is the way in which different groups in the community are failing to respect each other's differences. The problem seems to be particularly between the Gentile and the Jewish Christians. This was, at least potentially, extremely serious, for it cut at the heart of the church's mission to both Jews and Gentiles.

For this reason Paul makes no attempt here to present a comprehensive catechesis on Christian living. His concentration is on love, with its implications of respecting and welcoming others with their differences, on not judging and on humility. It includes the obligation to live in society as a good and respected citizen.

Romans 12:1

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your appropriate worship.

This is the first time in Romans that we have met the word ‘appeal’ (παρακαλέω). It is sometimes translated ‘beseech’, sometimes ‘exhort’, sometimes ‘encourage’, and sometimes ‘comfort’. Each nuance has value. Its root is the word ‘call’ (καλέω). Christ is called a παράκλητος in John 14:16; 1John 2:1. The call of the risen Christ is made through his Spirit (also called a παράκλητος in John 14:16,26; 15:26), and mediated through Paul’s words. The word παρακαλέω is Paul’s usual word for moral exhortation, and includes his consciousness of being an apostle of the risen Christ, inviting the readers to live the life to which Christ is calling them.

Christian morality is only possible because of the new perception, the new mind, the new Spirit which we have from Christ. It flows from a sense of awe and wonder before the amazing love of God and the call he offers to be what God designs us to be. It is what happens when our lives, our living bodies, our feelings, thoughts, intentions and decisions flow from a heart that draws on grace and respects the sacred. It is the fruit of consecration to God.

Paul makes his appeal ‘**by the mercies of God**’. He has been focusing in the first eleven chapters of this letter on ‘**God who shows mercy**’ (9:16), on the one whom he calls in another letter: ‘the Father of mercies’ (2 Corinthians 1:3).

Earlier he wrote: ‘Present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life’ (6:13). The verb ‘present’ (παριστήμι) is borrowed from the Jewish cult where it was used for bringing an offering into the presence of God. Paul repeats it here, appealing to the Christians in Rome to ‘present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice’.

The word ‘body’ (σώμα) refers to the human person in all the different ways in which we live and relate in the actual circumstances of our daily life in this world. Christian morality is about having good thoughts and good intentions and a pure heart – but it is about these as they influence action and find expression in the way in which we relate in the world. Paul is asking them to sacrifice themselves, that is, to present themselves to God so that God can make them holy and so achieve his purposes through them. As Hosea said centuries earlier, the kind of sacrifice desired by God is the intimate communion with God that is meant by ‘knowledge of God’, and is expressed in ‘steadfast love’ (see Hosea 6:6).

Paul describes this kind of ‘**worship**’ (λατρεία) as ‘**appropriate**’ (λογικος) - a favourite word in the Stoic vocabulary for describing behaviour. For Paul, however, it is not a matter of logical deduction from intelligently observed nature. Rather it is a matter of sensitively following the leading of the Spirit of Jesus. This is consistent with the teaching of the prophets who insist that true worship must be expressed through obedience to God’s will.

In calling this obedience ‘**appropriate**’, Paul is making the point that such behaviour is consistent with a rational understanding of reality, and explicitly the reality of God as revealed in Jesus. Living in this way, we take our proper place in the divine design which Paul has been describing in this letter.

Romans 12:2

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Living Jesus' life means resisting the pressure to fit in with the behaviour that is fashionable in the world that is not open to the Spirit. 'For the present form of this world is passing away' (1 Corinthians 7:31). Rather, we are to be transformed into Christ.

We are reminded of Paul's description of the Christian in a previous letter: 'All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:18).

A transformation is needed if we are to have ‘the mind of the Messiah’ (1 Corinthians 2:16). This is not something which we can do by our own will or effort, though cooperation with grace is necessary. Paul therefore reminds them of the need to ‘**be transformed by the renewing of your minds**’ – a renewal that can be brought about only by the risen Jesus through the gift of his Spirit. Only in this way will we be able to discern the will of God, what is truly good, what is truly pleasing to God, and what will truly bring our life to its perfect completion as willed by God.

Romans 12:3

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.

Only by contemplating Jesus as God's self-revelation can we come to a true self-estimation. In that contemplation we will see the most amazing dimension of ourselves – the fact that, along with everyone else, but in a unique way, we are loved by God.

Romans 12:4-6

As in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in the Messiah, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts (χαρίσματα) that differ according to the grace (χάρις) given to us.

Paul focuses on the organic harmony of the church in speaking of it as ‘one body in Christ’. Behind this acknowledgment of community is the more profound truth that it is the same Spirit that gives life to Christ and to the church, which can therefore be called, in a real sense, his body. Joined to Christ, therefore, we are necessarily joined to each other.

Since our life in Christ is a gift of grace, our Christian commitment must be based on two convictions. The first is that each of us must be sensitive to the way in which we share in the life of Christ, the way in which we have been graced, the gift (χαρίσμα) which we have from the Spirit. We must be sensitive to this gift and live it in faith. The second is that, since we each belong to the one Lord, and so belong to each other as members of his body, we must be sensitive to the gifts of the others in the community.

Romans 12:6-8

We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: the grace of prophecy, in proportion to faith; the one who has the charism of ministry, in ministering; the one who has the charism of teaching, in teaching; the one who has the charism of exhorting, in exhortation; the one who has the charism of sharing, in single-mindedness; the one who has the charism of leading, in efficiency and conscientiousness; the one who has the charism of compassion, in cheerfulness.

The two foundational gifts of Jesus to the church are those exercised by the apostles and the prophets (see 1 Corinthians 12:28). The apostles are our link with the historical Jesus; the prophets are our link with the risen and exalted Christ. The apostles ensure fidelity to tradition; the prophets ensure fidelity to the surprise of a revelation that is ever new.

The gift of prophecy is a prayer-gift, a gift of enlightenment by God, which gives insight into the mystery of who God is and of what God wills, together with the gift to be able to communicate this insight to others. To say that it is 'in proportion to faith', is to say that the measure of this gift is the measure of one's openness to grace and to welcoming of the Spirit. Paul may also be affirming the need for discernment, that the present word, claiming to come from the Spirit of Christ, truly does so and does not contradict the 'faith', in the sense of the apostolic tradition.

'Ministry' (διακονία) is a sharing in the mission of Jesus, the Servant of God.

Romans 12:9-12

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in the Spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering.

Paul speaks of the sharing in God's love which we are given as a gift from Jesus so that we can love one another with his love. Paul focuses on the **brotherly and sisterly love** (φιλαδελφία) which members of the Christian family are to have for each other. It is to be characterised by **affection** (φιλόστοργος), and by the way in which members of the community honour one another.

‘**Zeal**’ (σπουδή) denotes that quality whereby a person knows what he/she is doing and does it in a practical and efficient way.

Linked with **hope** is **patience**, needed if we are to remain loving when the burdens of life weigh heavily upon us.

Romans 12:12-13

Persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

The key to living a moral life is to ‘**persevere in prayer**’, for a moral life is the overflow of the communion in love which is the gift of the risen Jesus to us. It is in prayer that we open our hearts to receive this gift. Paul is echoing his appeal to the Thessalonians: ‘pray without ceasing’ (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

The Greek word translated here as ‘**contribute**’ is κοινωνέω. Recognising all that they have in common, Paul appeals to them to be generous.

In the Hebrew scriptures, the people are constantly being reminded of the fact that they once were exiles and slaves in Egypt. They must practise ‘**hospitality to strangers**’.

Romans 12:14-16

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Have a common mind; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.

To bless others is to pray and work that they might inherit the promises of God. Paul's words echo those of Jesus: 'Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you' (Luke 6:27-28).

Paul appeals to them to be empathetic: feeling with others in their joys and in their sorrows. He calls on them to have a common mind. He repeats here his earlier exhortation: 'do not become proud, but stand in awe' (11:20). Associating with the lowly is an aspect of the virtue of humility, a virtue dear to the heart of him who said: 'learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29). In the context of this appeal for humility, Paul repeats a phrase from the Book of Proverbs: 'Do not be wise in your own eyes' (Proverbs 3:7; see Romans 11:25). As will emerge, certain of the Gentile members of the community are too sure of themselves and too ready to dismiss members of the community whom they consider to be weak in faith.

Romans 12:17-19

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’ (Deuteronomy 32:35).

We recall Paul’s words to the Thessalonians: ‘See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all’ (1 Thessalonians 5:15).

The word translated ‘**noble**’ here is the Greek καλός, a favourite word among the Greek moralists. Behaviour that is καλός, is behaviour that fits with the ‘beauty’ of form in which true virtue consists.

Paul regularly wishes his readers ‘**peace**’ in the opening address of his letters (1:7). He exhorts the Romans to ‘Live peaceably **with all**.’

Romans 12:20-21

If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads' (Proverbs 25:21-22). **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

We are to continue loving even when we are treated badly. The Stoics taught this, for to behave otherwise is to lose one's peace of soul and to give to others control over one's soul. Paul is echoing the teaching of Jesus (see Luke 6:27, 35), for those who treat us badly are still those 'for whom Christ died' (1Corinthians 8:11) – a phrase that Paul will repeat later in the letter (14:15). Will Jesus not say to us: 'I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink'(Matthew 25:35)?

Burning coals seems to express the hope that a love-response will make one's enemies ashamed of their behaviour, and so lead them to repentance. Evil is to be opposed and overcome, but only by doing good.