

Romans 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Romans chapter 12. 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.

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.

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

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. 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.

Let love be genuine.

[1 : 3 7] Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 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.

In Romans chapter 12, Paul's grand vision of the gospel assumes clearer practical shape, one grounded in the life of the church as the renewed people of God. Here we find the answer to the crisis of humanity disclosed in chapter 1, with the formation of a new humanity, ordered not towards idolatry, but true worship.

As false worship led to the breaking down of humanity in chapter 1, the restoration of humanity begins with true worship in this chapter. This chapter also looks back to chapter 8, with the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law in those who live according to the spirit, and the formation of a new people in the fullness of time, people conformed to the image of Christ.

[3 : 0 0] It also looks back to the portrayal of God's sheer grace in the formation of his people in chapters 9-11, where the mercy of God was foregrounded. Paul's ethical instruction is firmly rooted in his theological vision.

There are many who believe that we can abstract the ethical dimensions from the Christian message, so as either to have a sort of Christian morality apart from Christian faith, or increasingly to have Christian faith purged of certain unwelcome ethical elements.

Paul does not allow for either of these divides. The therefore in verse 1 connects this with what has preceded it. The grounds to which Paul appeals are the mercies of God, which have been the subject of much of the preceding chapters.

For instance, chapter 11 verses 30-32. While Paul uses a different term in these references, the fundamental reality of mercy is the same.

The call to the heroes of the epistles to present their bodies as a living sacrifice frames Christian obedience in terms of the offerings of temple worship. Such worship is fulfilled in the worship of the church, a worship confirmed in transformed lives.

[4 : 27] Sacrifice was always symbolic. It represented the offering of the person, their entire self and all of their actions, under the symbol of an animal ascending to garden smoke.

The sacrifice required confirmation in the living of lives that were oriented to God in the same way as the sacrifice symbolised. The sacrifice here is a living one.

Unlike the animals which were killed before they were sacrificed, the true human sacrifice is of a living body, a body devoted to God's service. On several occasions the New Testament speaks of sacrifice continuing in the life of the church.

However, what was once the offering of animals in a physical temple is now the offering of human bodies, their actions and their gifts in the spirit. 1 Peter chapter 2 verses 4-5 As you come to him a living stone rejected by men, but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves, like living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

Philippians chapter 4 verse 18 I have received full payment and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God.

[5 : 44] Here we have a gift of money or resources presented as a sacrifice. Philippians chapter 2 verse 17 Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

The faith of the Philippian Christians is here a sacrifice, and Paul's potential martyrdom presented as a drink offering placed upon that. 2 Timothy chapter 4 verse 6 For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come.

Hebrews chapter 13 verses 15-16 Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name.

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. The bodies that are offered are plural, but the sacrifice is singular.

Now it's most likely that the term sacrifice is being used to refer to the mode of sacrifice that is being offered. However, there might possibly be a reference to the corporate character of the offering of our bodies.

[6 : 48] Although each Christian's body is a temple, we are also a temple together. We individually have bodies, but we are also the body of Christ together. We offer our bodies individually, but all in fellowship with others as well.

As we saw back in chapter 6, we must present our members to God as instruments of righteousness, for his obedient service. This is a sort of sacrifice. We might also think of the priests here, as they were offered to the Lord as servants, in ways analogous to the offering of animal sacrifices.

It is bodies that we are offering. We might perhaps recall Paul's discussion of baptism in chapter 6. In baptism our bodies are formally presented to God, washed as sacrifices, marked out as his possession, and as his dwelling place by his spirit.

God claims our physicality for his service, not just incorporeal souls or minds. Our bodies are holy and acceptable to God as sacrifices. Here again we get a sense of why treating the body with honour is of such importance for Paul.

This also contrasts with the dishonouring of the body in sexual immorality that Paul described back in chapter 1. This is spiritual or reasonable worship, worship that is appropriate to what God has accomplished for us in Christ.

[8 : 04] Christians must be separate from the world, not conformed to it. It is incredibly difficult not to assume the patterns of the world around us. This is one of several reasons why the church as a new community is so important.

We are creatures given to imitation, and without positive examples to imitate around us, we will easily assume the patterns of surrounding society. Paul instructs the Corinthians to imitate him as he imitates Christ.

We need communities of mutual imitation in holiness and faithfulness. Instead of being conformed to the world, we must be subject to an ongoing process of transformation. Paul doesn't seem to allow for any neutral position here.

You are either being conformed or you are being transformed. The transformation involves the renewal of the mind. We might here recall Paul's statements concerning the mind in chapter 8 verses 5 to 7.

Sin develops from a fundamental disposition of the heart and mind.

[9 : 21] It is a matter of our loves, our desires, imaginations and longings. Paul described this back in chapter 1 as minds were darkened in ignorance and people were given over to folly, with dishonouring passions and debased minds devoted to all sorts of evil.

Deliverance from the dominion of the flesh in our lives requires a renewal of the mind, a change in the fundamental orientation of our spirits within the world. Instead of darkened minds, our minds will be equipped to discern the will of God and that which is good, acceptable and perfect, enabling us to pursue ways of life in which, rather than debasing ourselves, we rise to our full stature.

Paul charges the hearers of the epistle not to have too high an opinion of themselves. This ties in with Paul's highly developed critique of boasting. Boasting must be grounded in God's grace, not in that which belongs to us and ourselves.

Greater humility is connected with a greater aptitude for handling great gifts. As Jesus teaches in Matthew 23 verses 11 to 12, the greatest among you shall be your servant.

Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. We must think about ourselves soberly, not as those who are puffed up, but as those who appreciate that we are the recipients of great gifts, completely apart from what we deserve.

[10 : 45] According to Paul, the measure for thinking about ourselves must be the measure of faith that God has assigned to us. There are two possible ways of reading this, at least. The first, which I prefer, would be a reference to each person having a different measure committed to them.

The thought then would be similar to 2 Corinthians 10, verse 13, John Barclay notes the fact that the word used for faith here could be used in the sense of trusteeship in other writings contemporary with Paul, which I think is the most natural way of understanding this.

It's that which is committed to your charge. A second possibility is that the faith in question is the common gift of faith received by all in Christ. The commonality of the one faith that we have would prevent us from exalting ourselves over others.

The content of the faith would also humble us in our recognition that we have nothing that we did not receive. We have a similar choice to make between two possible senses of the term faith in verse 6.

Paul proceeds to describe the church as a body with many members, its diversity and service of its growth and unity, its unity not of flattening out of its members, but a common good represented by each member in some regard to the whole.

[12 : 06] Paul expresses this reality in much more detail in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. The church has been given the one gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. However, each of us exercises our individual gifts of the Spirit to each other, and should recognise in each other a refraction of the one gift that is common to us all, but so often received through each other.

Paul's vision isn't one of a flat equality of individuals, but of a dynamic mutual involvement of persons who are what they are in fellowship with and in service of each other.

This all occurs in Christ, the Messiah, who is the source and the site of our unity. Likewise, as members in a body, rather than members in a club, the distinctiveness, the dignity, and the indispensability of each member is emphasised.

Our unity is of a single body in Christ. However, individually, we are also members of each other. Paul's point isn't merely that we are all individually in a vertical relationship to our common head, Christ.

We also have horizontal relationships with each other. We are members not just of Christ, but also of each other in Christ. We have responsibilities to each other, not least that of honouring each other as brothers and sisters.

[13 : 22] Paul lists a number of different gifts that can be exercised within the body of Christ. Prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution, leading, and acts of mercy.

This list is not comprehensive, and it also differs from the list that we find elsewhere, in places such as 1 Corinthians chapter 12 or Ephesians 4. The list here, for instance, is of more ordinary gifts in contrast to the sign gifts that are more prominent in 1 Corinthians.

If you have gifts, God desires that you use them for the benefit of others and for his glory. As you do so, you yourself can grow. God has given to us in order that we might share in his giving process.

We are richer as we give our gifts to others, not in order to build ourselves up, but to serve others. The exercise of various gifts is also connected with appropriate corresponding virtues.

Contributing should be done with generosity, leading with zeal, and acts of mercy with cheerfulness. It doesn't just matter that we exercise our gifts. How we do so matters too.

[14 : 26] As we read in 2 Corinthians chapter 9 verse 7, for instance, each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

As in 1 Corinthians chapter 13, Paul presents love ahead of everything else. Love is of paramount importance. Christian love must be genuine, not just feigned.

Such love is not merely a matter of feelings, although feelings should be involved. On the other side, Paul expects his readers to develop a godly hatred and loathing for that which is evil.

Genuine love and an abhorrence for evil will together equip us to cleave to what is good. At the heart of the fulfilment of the law is the writing of the law on the heart, so that we might perform it from the heart.

The law was always to be fulfilled in love, and the centrality of love in Pauline ethics is no accident at all. Paul presents a series of affections, practices and virtues to which Christians must devote themselves, all of which serve to build us up together.

[15 : 28] We must have a love for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, concerned not merely for ourselves, but also for the well-being of each other. We should go out of our way to show honour to each other, honouring each other as recipients of God's honour.

We must cultivate zeal and fervency in ourselves, regarding ourselves as servants of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our lives must be marked by rejoicing, patience in hardship, constancy in prayer, and hospitality and generosity to our brothers and sisters.

Moving his attention beyond the life of the church and Christians' treatment of each other within it, Paul speaks of how they should relate to persecutors. Persecution is to be expected and can't easily be avoided by the faithful.

However, how we respond to it is crucial. Like Christ, we should seek God's forgiveness for our enemies, rather than cursing them. We should not respond in kind to their cruelty and hatred.

In 1 Corinthians 12, verses 24-26, Paul describes the fellow feeling that should characterise the church. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

[16 : 41] If one member suffers, all suffer together. If one member is honoured, all rejoice together. It might be in verses 15-16 that Paul is charging the heroes of his epistle to pursue such fellow feeling with each other in the body of Christ.

However, N.T. Wright raises another possibility. Perhaps Paul is not referring to fellow members of the church, but to outsiders. Considering the placing of these verses at a point flanked by verses speaking of relations to those who mistreat us as Christians, this possibility shouldn't be dismissed.

If this were the case, Paul's teaching would be that Christians should seek appropriate common feeling with their non-Christian neighbours. When they are suffering, Christians should get alongside them and weep with them.

When they are celebrating, Christians should celebrate with them. Christians should pursue harmony, peace and mutual honour over conflict and polarisation. Christians should not be puffed up on account of their faith, but should particularly associate with those of little honour or status, regarding themselves as lowly servants of Christ.

Christians should not give in to a false sense of superiority. We must act honourably before our neighbours, having unimpeachable character, and being concerned not to bring the gospel into disrepute.

[17 : 55] This will likely, as we see in 1 Corinthians, require sacrifice of certain of our liberties for the sake of the gospel. As Paul adapted himself to those to whom he was ministering, so as to cause no needless offence to them, so Christians should be diligent in seeking to live peaceably with those around them, having good reputations, and being respectable, and adopting the customs that are appropriate for the time and place.

A powerful description of what this looks like is given by the Epistle to Diognetus, writing of the character of the early church in the second century. For the Christians are distinguished from other men, neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe, for they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity.

The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men, nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines.

But inhabiting Greek, as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life.

They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things, as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.

[19 : 23] They marry, as do all others. They beget children, but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh.

They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all.

They are unknown and condemned. They are put to death and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich. They are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all. They are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified.

They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified. They are reviled and blessed. They are insulted and repay the insult with honour. They do good, yet are punished as evildoers.

When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life. They are assailed by the Jews as foreigners, and are persecuted by the Greeks. Yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.

[20 : 20] Just as God showed the most incredible grace to us while we were still his enemies, so we too must reject the path of vengeance and retaliation. Rather than zealously pursuing justice in our causes, or taking matters into our own hands, we should place vengeance in the hands of God and his appointed ministers, of whom we will read in the following chapter.

The Lord is just, and he will act for his people. Confidence in the Lord of justice allows us to surrender our frantic quest for justice on our own terms, and to give up our grudges.

As an alternative form of practice, we should respond to cruelty with kindness. When we see an enemy in need, we must act with the compassion that we should exercise with a friend.

This will have the effect of heaping burning coals on our enemies' heads. Most take Paul to be referring to the shame caused by receiving kind treatment for cruel, something that might lead to change.

Another, less popular possibility is that the burning coals are a symbol of divine judgment. This needs to be handled with care. The story of David and Saul might be helpful in this regard though.

[21 : 27] David treated Saul with kindness and did not take vengeance into his own hands, even when he could. Rather, he left vengeance to God's providence. David's kindness did lead Saul to shame in his cruelty, but it also set Saul up for divine judgment.

We might consider the example provided by God himself in chapter 2, verses 4 to 5 of this book. Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.

But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. Like God did to us, we should show kindness to our enemies in the hope that they will repent.

However, if they do not, their cruel response to our kindness will lead to their greater condemnation. The final statement of the chapter sums up the concluding section. We don't fight evil with evil.

Evil is something that we can overcome, not merely retaliate against, when we act with goodness. However, if we reject the way of peace and grace, we will ourselves have been overcome by evil.

[22 : 35] The only true way to arrest the spread and resist the power of evil is to commit ourselves to the way of kindness to enemies exemplified by God himself. A question to consider.

How does Paul's gospel about the revelation of God's justice in Christ inform and empower the ethic of grace to enemies that he describes here?