

Bible Commentaries

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Romans 12 ▾

Verse 1

The doctrinal section of Romans concluded with the great doxology of the last chapter; and, following the style of other Pauline letters, as in Ephesians, Colossians, Galatians, etc., Paul next presented for his readers various practical applications of the holy gospel to their daily lives.

Concerning this twelfth chapter, it may be doubted if there is a more influential chapter in the New Testament for determining what is acceptable Christian conduct, this being due not to the superiority of these inspired words over others, but due to the fact of their having been read so frequently in public Christian assemblies. Many a rural congregation throughout the world has had for its chief Sunday enlightenment the reading of this remarkable chapter by some member of the congregation, especially in those situations where the services of a full-time minister were not available. This writer yet remembers with joy the frequency with which this chapter appeared upon the weekly agenda of the Lord's Day services in the country church he attended as a boy, there having been no capable reader in the congregation who, at one time or another, was not called upon to read it. The sacred memory of that little church where friends and neighbors gathered in the vale of Dudley has blessed him half a hundred years.

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. (Romans 12:1)

How magnanimous is that authority which, having the power to command, stoops to plead for mortal compliance with God's will! "I beseech you ..." means "I beg of you, please ..."^[1] This admonition still lies under the spell of that heavenly love radiating from the great doxology just concluded in **Romans 11**, and relies strongly upon God's great love as the basic motivation of all human obedience.

Present your bodies ... The body here is from the Greek word [soma], meaning the physical body; and, despite that Batey and others refer it to "the whole man,"^[2] the contrast with "mind" in the next verse focuses the thought on the physical body here. Vincent, as quoted by Wuest, stated that:

The body here is the physical body; and the word for "present" is the technical term for presenting the Levitical offerings and victims.^[3]

A living sacrifice ... Contrasts the slain offerings of the old institution with the living sacrifices of the new.

The typical nature of the Old Testament regime, and the prophetic intent of its sacrifices and ceremonials, required, absolutely, that antitypes of the new covenant should be changed to accommodate the new information brought by the actual appearance of the Messiah upon the earth.

For example, the sacrificial lamb, slain upon countless pre-Christian altars, was an eloquent and instructive type of the Lord Jesus Christ; but, when Christ came and died for man's sins as the type indicated he would, there followed the resurrection of Christ from the dead, a fact incapable of being prefigured by the slaughter of a lamb. In lieu of the old sacrifice, therefore, God ordained that the Christian himself be presented as a living sacrifice, dying to sin, buried with Christ in baptism, and rising up to walk in newness of life (**Romans 6:1-4**), and thus providing a continual witness of the primary facts of the gospel (the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, **1 Corinthians 15:1-4**), and pointing back to those blessed events similarly to the manner in which the sacrificial lamb pointed forward to them, but with the significant difference that the new sacrifice referred far more emphatically to Christ than did the ancient type. Thus, it is evident that, in the Father's wise design, the Lord Jesus Christ is the focus of all true religion, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament alike. Every true Christian is himself a presented sacrifice witnessing to the great facts of the Christian gospel.

Batey was correct in the view that:

This living sacrifice can best be understood in terms of dying and rising with Christ (**Romans 6:1-11**).^[4]

Even more than this, however, is certainly included. The believer indeed presents his body for baptism, this being an important element in the new birth itself, and thus accomplishes a sacrifice which requires the volition and assent of the whole person; but the presenting does not end at the baptistery. There is also the formal and faithful presentation of the body in public corporate worship, regularly throughout the Christian's probation. Now, as in Job's day, "when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord" (**Job 1:6**), the sons of God still present themselves before the Lord in the Lord's Day assemblies of the church (and other times also), a duty which Christians are categorically commanded not to neglect (**Hebrews 10:25**). Nor can it end there. The body is the chief instrument of the person and is to be presented to God through service to humanity, by preaching, teaching, ministering, and helping people, and not merely for some space of time, but throughout life.

Holy ... modifies sacrifice; and, since the sacrifice in view is the body ([Greek: soma]), this amounts to an affirmation that the body, as such, is not evil. Paul noted in another place that the same body capable of being joined to a harlot, in the case of the Corinthians, was actually the "temple of the Holy Spirit" (**1 Corinthians 6:12-20**). Such teaching prohibits the view that the body is in itself sinful or evil.

Acceptable to God ... is the pledge of inspiration that believers presenting themselves in the manner indicated shall indeed be accepted by God and blessed in so doing. The condition of acceptance, stated here, is holiness; and, as Sanday observed:

The Christian sacrifice must be holy and pure in God's sight; otherwise, it cannot be acceptable to him.^[5]

Which is your reasonable service ... (as in the **KJV**) appears to be a better rendition than the English Revised Version (1885), the commentators being all in agreement that "pertaining to the mind" is an essential element of the meaning here. Thayer said that this "reasonable service" is

"worship which is rendered by the reason, or the soul."^[6] The concept of what is the intended meaning, as viewed in this commentary, is that which sees that nothing could possibly be more reasonable, nor more in keeping with the conclusions of the highest intelligence, than the fact that mortal man, doomed to descend so shortly into the tomb, should rally all of his soul's energies to seek the Lord and trust the Creator alone who has the power to redeem him from the rottenness of the grave and endow him with everlasting life, the agonizing desire of which is the great passion of mankind.

Further, the most skillful exercise of intelligence, even of the greatest minds ever to appear on earth, reveals that such a seeking after God is fully consonant and harmonious with all that really blesses man, even in this life, and with all that in any way contributes to his peace and happiness now. Let a man employ his mind, his reason and intelligence, in the contemplation of one fact alone, namely, that God created man; and then let him ask if it is reasonable, or not, that such a being as God could have created man with such a nature as to make him happier in the service of the devil than in the service of God! In this single instance, and in a million others, the most ardent application of discerning intelligence will always reveal the reasonableness of serving God. It is believed that this is what Paul affirmed here.

[1] Kenneth S. Wuest, *Romans in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955), p. 204.

[2] Richard A. Batey, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans* (Austin, Texas: R. B. Sweet Company, 1969), p. 151.

[3] Kenneth Wuest, *op. cit.*, p. 205.

[4] Richard A. Batey, *loc. cit.*

[5] W. Sanday, *Ellicott's Commentary on the Holy Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. 251.

[6] Kenneth Wuest, *op. cit.*, p. 206.

Verse 2

And be not fashioned according to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

The world is very much with Christians, who, though not of the world, are nevertheless still in it and subject to its fashions and allurements, unless these shall be rejected; and that rejection is the thing commanded here.

The world ... is not a reference to the physical geography of the planet, but is spoken of the natural habits, desires, and value judgments of the natural man, the natural man being man apart from the loving guidance of his Maker. The things of God's Spirit are "foolishness" to the unregenerated (**1 Corinthians 2:14**); but the Christian must adopt an utterly different set of value-judgments, based upon an utterly new and higher concept of life, and thus encompassing a view of the eternal things, rather than merely those of earth and time.

Significantly, both the mind and the physical body, in these first two verses, are seen as consciously controlled and directed. Therefore, even the mind, which is often thought of as that portion of the person which does the controlling, must itself be brought into subjection to God. And what is the instrument by which that can be accomplished? It is the ego, the "I," the essence of the person itself

that must do this; and, therefore, specific attention to that should be given. That the inner monitor of life does indeed have control over both mind and body is seen in the Old Testament statement:

He that ruleth his own spirit is greater than he that taketh a city (**Proverbs 16:32**).

Whatever it is that rules man's spirit, that essential center of human control, is the seat of all authority over human thought and behavior.

Man is so created that the inner throne of life may not be occupied by himself, because it was made for God's occupancy, God being Spirit in nature; but, alas, due to the fall in Eden, Satan, also spiritual, has been allowed by man to occupy the place intended for God. Invariably, this throne, this inner monitor of the total life, must be occupied either by God or by Satan. Man may fancy that he may take the throne himself; but if he does, his very act of dethroning God has brought him under the sway of evil and elevated Satan to the seat of authority in his life. There are, thus, not three potential occupants of the soul-center, but only two.

That is why God's classification of human kind is always dual, and never otherwise. Thus, such metaphors as the sheep and the goats, the wheat and the chaff, the wise and the foolish, those on the left and on the right, God and Mammon, etc., are so prominent in scripture.

Through heredity and environment both, man has a natural bent toward evil, thus giving Satan an advantage in seizing control of the person, which always happens shortly after man reaches an accountable age; but every soul ever born yet retains enough of the image of God within to enable the soul to dethrone the evil one and enthrone the rightful Occupant. This is done by believing and obeying the gospel of Jesus Christ. This change of masters within is the enabling charter, the validating act, which enables the renewing of the mind which Paul here commanded; but it cannot be accomplished in an instant. That is why the command is here given to Christians who were already baptized and risen with Christ to newness of life (**Romans 6:1-10**). After justification, which took place in the new birth, there is a growth process by which the mind is truly in a state of being renewed throughout life. Through the disciplines of prayer, study, worship, and meditation the inward man is gloriously renewed, as long as the true Occupant is maintained upon the proper eminence within. It was of this that Paul wrote:

Though our outward man is decaying, yet our inward man is renewed day by day (**2 Corinthians 4:16**).

This understanding that the mind itself is but one of the instruments of the true person explains the atheism and perversity which sometimes mark human intelligence. When Satan is on the throne, the mind itself is not free, but subservient to evil, all of the highest gifts of intelligence being absolutely denied by Satan. It was of such persons that Paul wrote:

The God of this world hath blinded the minds of the unbelieving, that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not dawn upon them (**2 Corinthians 4:4**).

The renewing of the mind is not possible except through the maintenance of God upon that inner throne which monitors all human activity, physical and mental. Under many different expressions in the Holy Scriptures, the description of this divine inner Control is presented. Here are some of them:

Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus (**Philippians 2:5**).

Ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2:38f**).

Which is Christ in you the hope of glory (**Colossians 1:27**).

The Spirit that dwelleth in us (**James 4:5**).

Even as God said I will dwell in them (**2 Corinthians 6:16**).

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (**Colossians 3:16**), etc.SIZE>

Manifestly, all of the above scriptures have reference to exactly the same thing, the presence of God upon the inner throne of life. Of all the above, said to dwell in the child of God, none dwells without all the others.

That ye may prove ... indicates that the soul which does indeed allow God to take over in his mind will enjoy the most overwhelming proof imaginable that such a state is the highest destiny of man, being in perfect harmony with the good and acceptable will of God. God's way is the good way; his will is the perfect way for people; and the soul that tries it shall know it is true. His own experience will demonstrate it.

Verse 3

For I say, through the grace that was given to me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think: but so to think as to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to each man a measure of faith.

Even after Christ is enthroned in the heart, the old mental habits and value-judgments of the natural man are prone to reassert themselves, these being the most persistent and pernicious of human sins. The body is relatively easy to bring under control; but the pride, ambition, conceit, vainglory and self-love of the mind can only be driven out by the filling of the personality with the "mind of Christ" who "made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant" (**Philippians 2:5f**), thus sacrificing the very thing to which the natural human mind clings most tenaciously.

In this verse, Paul was still dealing with the problem of getting a new mind into Christians. Paradoxically, even the great spiritual emoluments of Christian service, the achievement of a degree of human righteousness, as viewed by human eyes, the gaining of respectability and reputation among fellow mortals, all of the rewards and honors of godly living, even such things as these, quite easily, and often do, lead to pride, conceit, arrogance, and self-righteousness, which are totally abhorrent to God. It cannot be doubted that this very fact led to the fantastic emphasis in this epistle to the effect that nobody, but nobody, ever deserved salvation.

Even the fulfillment of conditions upon which God gives salvation cannot merit the gift. Salvation is the gift of God, and only that, even though no one may receive it while spurning the conditions upon which it is freely given.

More highly than he ought to think ... It was the primary sin of Israel that they fell into the thinking prohibited here, a lapse which led at last to their tragic hardening. In chapter 11, Paul strongly warned against the same violation in the Gentiles, and that warning is in view here. (See under **Romans 11:18-20**.) In this recurrence of the warning, he plainly forbade that conceit which so naturally rises in the minds of people who, through God's mercy, are permitted to enjoy some little distinction of faith and piety.

Despite the warning, Paul's admonition was not directed to the utter negation of self, nor the sinful depreciation of the noble endowments God has granted mortal man; but it strikes a perfect balance, admitting that it is right and proper for one to think highly of himself, but not more highly

than becomes a sinner without merit of salvation, and certainly not so highly as to produce any conceit that might arise from a comparison of his own gifts with those of his fellow Christians.

Verse 4

For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another.

These verses touch upon the same view of the body of Christ that Paul outlined in **1 Corinthians 12**th chapter, where it is declared that there "is but one body." All Christians are part of the same entity. (See article "Christ Incorporated" under **Romans 3:24**.) Since Christians are all members of one body and therefore intimately joined in one communion and fellowship with each other, the savage competition for honors and preferments should give place to loving concern on the part of every member for every one of the others. The various gifts, abilities, and "offices," or functions, as distributed among the members of Christ's body should not become the occasion of jealousy, envy, and deprecation on the part of the "have not's," nor should arrogance, pride, conceit, and self-importance mar the attitude of the "have's." To use the analogy that Paul used in 1 Corinthians, it would be as logical for the foot to be jealous of the ear, as for Christians to corrupt their love of one another through pride, envy or jealousy.

In Christ ... is a key phrase, as often noted here, in the book of Romans. Those alone who have been "baptized into Christ" are truly in him; and this does not overlook the absolute necessity of faith and repentance also. Can it really be said of any man who will not be baptized, as Christ commanded all people to be - can it truly be said of such a man that he **BELIEVES** (!) in Christ? Let every man answer that one for himself.

Verse 6

And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness.

In these verses, Paul enumerated, with appropriate admonitions, some of the various gifts of Christians, the overriding sentiment being that **WHATEVER** one does in Christ's service, it should be discharged with true faith in God who provided the ability to do it, and with the intention of doing it as perfectly as possible, and especially without reference to odious comparisons, rankings, and preferments which appear so generally in the patterns of human behavior.

Prophecy ... Although there were prophets, in the usual present-day sense of the word, in New Testament times, as, for example, Agabus (**Acts 21:10**), the meaning of the word here has a wider application. **Exodus 4:16**; **Exodus 7:1**, shows that Aaron was Moses' prophet, or spokesman; and, in that view, every preacher and teacher of God's word is a prophet. This view is consistent with **1 Corinthians 14:3**:

He that prophesieth speaking unto men unto edification, and exhortation, and consolation.

Just what shade of meaning Paul had in mind, however, is not the important consideration, because the admonition attached is applicable to every kind of prophesying, being this, that it should be done in proportion to the faith of them doing it. Thus any preaching, or teaching, that does not flow out of the vibrant, living faith of the teacher or preacher himself is hollow, hypocritical, and ineffectual.

Ministry ... technically means the service of a deacon in the church; but the word is used more generally to include even the work of the apostles themselves, as indicated by Paul's word "our" in this verse. It refers to any kind of service undertaken for God's glory in the church; and the instruction is that whatever is done should be done enthusiastically and faithfully.

He that teacheth ... refers to teachers as distinguished from prophets, some of the latter, at least, being inspired, whereas teachers, in the sense here, are not; although they must be understood as being faithful students and expositors of the sacred word. **1 Corinthians 12:28** gives the proper ranking of "apostles, prophets, teachers, gifts of healings, miracles, helps, governments, and divers kinds of tongues." It is of surpassing interest that "governments" which receive such inordinate rankings among people are actually near the bottom. And as for "various kinds of tongues," that was the lowest thing in the church! That Paul intended in that passage to rank these things consciously, is proved by the repeated use of such words as first, second, third, etc. The Christian teacher is third in this echelon, being outranked only by the inspired apostles and prophets.

Exhortation, liberality, showing mercy ... are reference to various Christian duties of a private and personal nature, the exhortation being that grace, humility, faith, simplicity, and consideration for others should always mark the services of them that have in mind to please the Lord. The suggestion of "cheerfulness" as an accompaniment of showing mercy is most appropriate, since many a merciful or charitable deed has been nullified by the grudging and censorious manner that accompanied it.

Verse 9

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.

Hodge noted that:

The love intended by this verse is probably love to all men, and not to Christians exclusively; as, in **Romans 12:10**; **BROTHERLY AFFECTION** is particularly specified.^[7]

Hypocrisy is, of all vices, one of the worst to which Christians may be addicted. The most vehement denunciations of the Master himself were directed against it (**Matthew 23**). The last clauses here are two sides of the same virtue. Hating evil and loving good are not separate and distinct virtues, but part and parcel of each other. No man ever hated evil without loving good, or vice versa. Again from Hodge:

The words rendered to **ABHOR** and to **CLEAVE** to are particularly forcible, and express the highest degree of hatred on the one hand, and of persevering devotion on the other.^[8]

[7] Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), p. 395.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 396.

Verse 10

In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another; in honor preferring one another.

The Greek word for "love" in both this and the preceding verses is [agape], that great New Testament word which has captured the loving admiration of people in all generations, meaning love in its most comprehensive and selfless qualities. There are two qualifying words which are added here as specifically applicable to members of the Christian family and the kind of love they should bear each other. It is all that the other is, and more. These qualifying words are [φιλωστοργιο], meaning the kind of affection that exists in a family, and [φιλαδελφια], literally meaning brotherly love. McGarvey described it as:

(Like that) of an animal for its offspring, a parent for his child, a near relative for his close kin. Its use here indicates that the church tie should rival that of the family.
[9]SIZE>

In honor preferring one another ... carries the connotation of setting an example and taking the lead in the honoring of others. Instead of coveting and trying to grasp honors for one's self, the Christian should rather desire to exalt his fellow Christians, even taking the lead in the conveyance of such honors to them; and, as David Lipscomb stated it,

Instead of waiting for others to honor us, we should lead them in the manifestation of esteem and respect.^[10]

[9] J. W. McGarvey and Phillip Y. Pendleton, *The Standard Bible Commentary* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Standard Publishing Company, 1916), p. 498.

[10] David Lipscomb, *A Commentary on the New Testament Epistles* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1969), p. 226.

Verse 11

In diligence not slothful; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord.

A lazy Christian is a contradiction of terms. Having been saved from the guilt and ravages of sin, the Christian is man at the zenith of his best powers. Strength, zeal, enthusiasm, vigor, and the full thrust of his total energy should distinguish the Christian's performance in business, trade, profession, study, artistic creation, or in anything else that he pursues as a vocation; and, above everything, such qualities should characterize his devotion and service in the church. The opposite of what Paul commanded here is lukewarmness, a negative condition represented as disgusting to God himself (**Revelation 3:16**).

Verse 12

Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing stedfastly in prayer.

As the deeply spiritual R. C. Bell expressed it,

Our difficulty lies not in comprehending but in obeying.^[11]

The glorious hope of the Christian is more than enough to flood the soul with rejoicing, even in the midst of abounding disappointments, provided it is kept in focus by the mind. This hope is the anchor of the soul (**Hebrews 6:19**) which enables the child of God to endure whatever storms may come, but not, however, without prayer. Prayer is the breathing of the redeemed soul, and the cessation or neglect of it will smother and destroy spiritual life.

ENDNOTE:

[11] R. C. Bell, *Studies in Romans* (Austin, Texas: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1957), p. 138.

Verse 13

Communicating to the necessities of the saints; given to hospitality.

Communicating ... refers to the giving of money or supplies and is the constant duty of every Christian, the first priority in such sharing of God's gracious gifts going to Christians, rather than to the world generally; and even the Christian's claim upon the generosity of his fellows being resident in his "necessities," and not merely in his desires and wants. Many of the commentators translate "distributing" for communicating; but, upon the assumption that the English Revised Version (1885) is founded upon a necessary implication of the word, it appears that the "sending of funds" is part of the meaning of this word. At least, many New Testament examples did involve the sending of contributions from one part of the world to another. In this light, therefore, there is indicated here the need for special concern for such needs as those of missionaries and of communities visited by calamity or disaster.

Saints ... Regarding this, Thomas wrote:

Its simple meaning is "belonging to God," and refers invariably to our position, not our condition, to our standing in Christ, and not to our actual state. It is most unfortunate that the word has been so frequently associated with exceptional holiness, when it means nothing of the kind, but only the actual fact that from the first moment of conversion every Christian soul is consecrated and devoted to God. The needs of God's people were great when these words were written; and we know how keen Paul was in encouraging the Gentiles to help their poorer brethren in Jerusalem. In the same way, he appeals to all the Christians in Rome to communicate to their fellow believers whatever might be necessary.^[12]

In an affluent society like that in current U.S.A., the desires of the so-called poor are frequently substituted for necessities in the benevolent programs of both the church and the secular society and government, and, in this, failing to retain the Biblical concept of "need" as the basis of all true benevolence; but, despite this, there are always examples of Christian need in every community. It is the plain duty of the more able to supply such needs, and the widespread neglect of the Christian obligation of charity and hospitality must be deplored. Lard went so far as to say:

I have never seen it practiced except upon a scale so parsimonious as to render it a virtual nullity. The scanty manner in which the rich disciples of the present day share the wants (and one supposes Lard meant the needs of the poor) of the poor is a sham. From their thousands, they dole out dimes; and from their storehouses full, mete out handfuls. This is no compliance with the precept; and it were better for a Christian that he were without a coat to his name, than, having two, not to give to his brother who has none. Such precepts as the present will, in the day of eternity, prove the fatal reef on which many a saintly bark is stranded.^[13]

Given to hospitality ... in the Greek is "pursuing hospitality" (margin); and, as Godet thought:

We are not to confine ourselves to according it when it is asked, but we should ever seek opportunities of exercising it.^[14]

[12] Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), p. 341.

[13] Moses E. Lard, *Commentary on Paul's Letter to Romans* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Christian Board of Publication, 1914), p. 391.

[14] F. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), p. 436.

Verse 14

Bless them that persecute you; bless, and curse not.

In this extended enumeration of Christian obligations, most of what Paul enjoined thus far was to have been expected as the natural duties arising from the close and affectionate relationship existing in God's family of Christians; but the great and active principle of that great love which is the hallmark of true discipleship goes beyond what we might have expected. This principle begins to emerge in the preceding verse, where the "communicating" to the saints' necessities is not confined to alleviation of distress before one's very eyes, but extends to meeting those needs of which he has merely heard; and that principle emerges further in the admonition that hospitality is not merely for our friends and acquaintances, but is for strangers also. Now, in this verse, the principle is extended to encompass doing good to wicked and malevolent enemies of the child of God. Love is thus revealed as the Christian weapon against evil itself, the heavenly device by which evil itself may be overcome by good, that being the great thought with which the chapter concludes.

Verse 15

Rejoice with them that rejoice; weep with them that weep.

This teaches the community of mankind. The Christian does not exist in a state of isolation and indifference to the fate of others, but, like his holy Master, has compassion, being involved in and moved by the emotions of others, whether of joy or sorrow. Only the wicked or the thoughtless are callused against the joys and sorrows of humanity; and, if one permits himself to become hardened against concern for fellow mortals, he thereby forfeits the likeness he might have had for him who wept at the grave of Lazarus, had compassion on the multitude, and replenished the wine at the wedding in Cana.

Verse 16

Be of the same mind one toward another. Set not your mind on high things, but condescend to things that are lowly. Be not wise in your own conceits.

Godet observed that this verse is commonly understood as a reference to good feeling among members of the church, a meaning which he rejected as being contrary to all sound exegesis, saying:

The only possible meaning is: "aiming at the same object for one another as for yourselves"; that is to say, having each the same solicitude for the temporal and spiritual well-being of his brethren as for his own.^[15]

This verse is a prohibition of partiality and respect of persons within communities of Christians. The development within congregations of small coteries of the allegedly elite, the formation of inner circles of preference, the stratification of churches along social, economic, or other lines of demarcation these and all similar separations are evil. Regardless of how naturally and conveniently such divisions (yes, that is what they are) tend to appear, that magnanimous and outreaching love of the true Christian will resist and countermand them. Every member of the body of Christ is a sacred person, every Christian the brother of every other Christian; and God knows no aristocracy in his holy church except that of loving service.

Set not your mind on high things ... does not contradict the Scripture which says,

Set your mind on the things which are above (**Colossians 3:2**).

The high things mentioned here are the so-called high things which constitute the difference between the preferred and neglected Christians, things like wealth, privilege, education, social grace, power, office, and position in the world. Not setting the mind on such things means not being influenced by them and not allowing them to be the basis of one's attitude toward his brothers in Christ. The certainty of this meaning derives from the second clause in which Paul commanded the Christian to associate with the lowly. Instead of being carried away with admiration of the rich and powerful, Paul said, "Be carried away (this the exact meaning in Greek, see margin) with the lowly."

This writer is personally indebted to the late philanthropist and devout student of the word of God, Andrew Mizell Burton, Nashville, Tennessee, for a focus upon the meaning of this verse. He often spoke of it as his favorite verse and attributed many of the greatest blessings of his remarkable life to an observance of its teaching.

Be not wise in your own conceit ... This admonition was implied in **Romans 11:25**, being there a reflection of the sternest warnings against this vice earlier in that chapter, and here it is stated imperatively, having its immediate application to that form of conceit which allows petty little human arrangements of a "pecking order" among the sacred fellowship of the redeemed as the basis upon which some associations are cultivated, and others neglected.

ENDNOTE:

[15] Ibid., p. 437.

Verse 17

Render to no man evil for evil. Take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men.

Evil for evil ... The child of God may not set himself to "get even" with another, nor retaliate in kind against any who might slight or wrong him. The one who receives the Lord upon the inner throne of his life and yields to the Divine Will will return good for evil, bless them that curse, and do good to them that despitefully use him. Such reaction to evil is the grand strategy of God who will

overcome evil with good; and the announcement of that strategy, to be made at the end of the chapter, had been in Paul's mind throughout the enumeration of the admonitions listed here.

This has no reference at all to the duty of a magistrate commissioned under the law to render the required penalty against an evil doer as the just recompense of a crime. Murray stated that

Misunderstanding of these admonitions arises from a failure to see that they are concerned with our private, individual, personal relations to one another and not with magisterial and judicial administration. It is noteworthy that the apostle proceeds immediately after these admonitions to deal with the prerogatives and functions of the magistrate and therefore with the judicial, and penal institution. To the magistrate is given the power of the sword to avenge the evil-doer (**Romans 13:4**). If he avenges wrongdoing he inflicts the evil of penalty.^[16]

Take thought for things honorable in the sight of all men ... is a restriction of Christian conduct to exclude anything held to be disreputable, dishonorable, reprehensible, or detestable by human opinion in society as a whole, or as officially expressed through the regulations imposed by government. All illegal activity is forbidden, being here condemned and proscribed, whether or not the law may be based upon absolute truth, the mere fact of a thing's being illegal under the laws of the state being sufficient disqualification to deny it as permissible for a Christian. Gambling, for example, will never be permissible for any Christian, as long as it is illegal in fifty states. It is not honorable in the sight of all the police establishments in North America. Further, churches which stoop to finance their activities by gambling, even if legally permitted, fall under the judgment of this apostolic ban, because, despite the legal exemption sometimes grafted churches, vast numbers of enlightened people still consider it evil. Things that are tainted in the popular view of society as a whole are not for Christians, regardless of the specious logic which would deny this.

Murray is correct in underscoring this verse as an additional principle of Christian behavior, thus:

For the first time in this chapter, this type of consideration appears, namely, the need for maintaining a deportment that approves itself to men. The close parallel, "We take thought for things honorable not only in the sight of the Lord but also in the sight of men" (**2 Corinthians 8:21**), points up this consideration.^[17]

Such a decent respect to the opinions of mankind was frequently noted by Paul, who commended himself to "every conscience of men" (**2 Corinthians 4:2**), and who required that a Christian elder "must have a good report of those who are without" (**1 Timothy 3:7**).

[16] John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), Vol. II, p. 137.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

Verse 18

If it be possible, as much as in you lieth, be at peace with all men.

This instruction to be at peace with all people is conditioned upon the objective possibility of being so. The subjective impossibility of the Christian's being unable to restrain himself, or some such thing, is not in view here at all. The impossibility allowed by Paul as a negation of this precept would lie only in the kind of a situation where truth and sacred duty would require resistance. Peace with some people under some circumstances, impossible without the sacrifice of sacred honor and duty, is not here enjoined. An apostle said:

The wisdom which is from above is first pure, then peaceable (**James 3:17**).

But, while allowing theoretical situations where peace could not honorably be maintained, we should strictly heed the principle of avoiding discord. Christ taught that people should give the cloak also, go the second mile, turn the other cheek, and avoid conflict by any honorable means whatsoever. What a shameful contrast is the conduct of some persons, allegedly Christian, who are ever spoiling for strife, and who, far from avoiding it, actually seek and enjoy all kinds of confrontations that lead to bitterness and contention.

Verse 19

Avenge not yourselves, beloved; but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord.

The child of God may not collect a blood debt, to borrow the euphemism of the North Vietnamese who murdered 9,000 civilians in one of their Tet offensives. Vengeance is not a Christian prerogative, this being true for a number of reasons, such as: (1) God has forbidden it; (2) it is illegal in any civilized state; and (3) it is contrary to the Christian principle of overcoming evil with good, the latter being the master strategy against evil. The punishment of evil-doers is a prerogative of God and may not be usurped by his children.

The quotation here is from **Deuteronomy 32:35**, where the text has,

To me belongeth vengeance and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste.^{SIZE>}

Significantly, Paul did not use the exact words of Deuteronomy, but stated the thought in a form found nowhere else in scripture except in **Hebrews 10:30**, where the appearance of exactly the same words strongly suggests Pauline authorship of Hebrews. Who but Paul, of all the people of that generation, could have paraphrased a portion of Deuteronomy in exactly the same words? There also seems to be a different meaning from that of Moses, as similarly in other passages of Romans (**Romans 10:6-8**), thus still further tying the peculiar arrangement of these words to Paul alone. In Deuteronomy, the emphasis is upon the occurrence of some disaster, accident, or calamity to check the evil-doer, with the implication that God's agency might cause such to occur; but here Paul's thought pointed to the function of the magistrate and the legal system as the agency through which God will execute vengeance upon wrongdoing, which is exactly the subject Paul was about to take up (**Romans 13**). Whiteside especially understood this to be the case. He said:

To punish evil-doers is God's prerogative; let him do the punishing in his own appointed way. Paul's quoting that statement (**Deuteronomy 32:35**) did not change its meaning nor its application. It does not refer to the vengeance God will take on sinners at the final judgment. Under the law of Moses, God took vengeance upon evil-doers by the agency of chosen authorities. Paul's quoting that part of the law did not change its application, and the vengeance here mentioned will be taken in the same way. A little later, Paul will show how this is to be done.^[18]

Whatever is the full meaning of the question of God's taking vengeance upon wicked men, the use of constituted authorities is surely one way it is accomplished (see under

Romans 13:4); but this writer believes that God may, for sufficient reason, bring disaster upon a sinner, as surely implied in the Deuteronomic passage cited. Also, the final judgment is another theater of God's vengeance upon the wicked. The fact of God's taking vengeance is here revealed, as in the Old Testament; and at least three manifestations of that vengeance are visible: (1) in the matter of direct providence (the case of Herod in **Acts 12**); (2) through legal authorities; and (3) at the final judgment. There are also possibly other ways in which God executes vengeance which lie totally beyond our human knowledge or understanding. The fact that vengeance will truly be taken is a truth to be held in humility and awe.

ENDNOTE:

[18] R. L. Whiteside, *A New Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to Saints in Rome* (Denton, Texas: Miss Inys Whiteside, 1945), p. 256.

Verse 20

But if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head.

This is an amazing scripture. The writer once heard of a woman involved in bitter quarrels with her husband. Seeking counsel, she was asked, "Have you tried heaping coals of fire on his head?" She replied, "No, but I tried a skillet of hot grease!" She, like many others, failed to realize that Paul here used a figure of speech, a style of rhetoric often found in the sacred scriptures. As Batey noted:

The original meaning of this figure of speech has been lost, but Paul suggests that the enemy will burn with shame for his abuse of one who loves him.^[19]

Paul, throughout this chapter, has consistently elaborated the strategy of overcoming evil with good, the same being the ancient strategy of the Lord, announced centuries earlier in the book of Proverbs, thus:

If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: for thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head, and the Lord shall reward thee (**Proverbs 25:21,22**).

Rather than delving into the strange and even bizarre interpretations people have suggested for this passage, it seems that it would be better to accept the explanation offered by Batey, to the effect that the actual meaning of the figure is lost. Whatever might have been the meaning, the motive of providing food and drink for an enemy cannot be that of increasing his punishment, nor of aggravating his guilt, the true purpose, or motive, being the effective discipline of the Christian's own spirit and likewise the subduing of enmity within the adversary. This alone would fit the strategy announced in the next verse.

ENDNOTE:

[19] Richard A. Batey, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

Verse 21

Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

Here appears the real reason for extending kindness to enemies. If the child of God should retaliate in kind for all acts of enmity against himself, he would shortly find himself engaging in all kinds of shameful and wicked conduct. To prevent such an unwholesome development, the servant of the Lord must launch a counter-attack, returning good for evil, and deploying good actions against the evil actions of the enemy.

Here in **Romans 12:21** is the grand strategy of God with regard to human evil. The natural man finds himself living and operating in a world where one rotten apple can make a barrel of good apples rotten; but the spiritual man, having the mind of the Spirit, proceeds upon the premise that one good apple might make a barrel of rotten apples sound! The divine nature of this priceless precept has elicited the most extravagant praise, as well it should. Macknight wrote:

Blackwell, after praising the language in which this precept is delivered, adds, "This is a noble strain of Christian courage, prudence, and goodness, that nothing in Epictetus, Plutarch, or Antonine can vie with. The moralists and heroes of paganism could not write and act to the height of this."^[20]

Greathouse has this:

Dodd considers the last sentence of this chapter "an admirable summary of the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, about what is called non-resistance"; and it expresses, he thinks, "the most creative element in Christian ethics."^[21]

Thus, in view of the foregoing consideration, the spiritual instinct of the humble Christian, as represented by such congregations as the one mentioned at the head of this chapter, is demonstrated to be correct by focusing upon this magnificent chapter of practical Christian living.

^[20] James Macknight, *Apostolic Epistles* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1960), p. 121.

^[21] William M. Greathouse, *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1968), p. 248.

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