

How Then Shall We Live
Romans 12
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Paul has spent the first eleven chapters in Romans talking about what God has done for us in Christ. It could be summarized in words like these: “Grace has won. Mercy has triumphed.” Now he turns in chapter 12 to the question “How then shall we live?” The chapter is a wonderfully complete statement about how we live now “in Christ”—and in Christ’s Body, the church.

“I appeal to you, therefore brothers and sisters by the mercies of God.” We all live now “Under the Mercy”.

I

How then shall we live? *Present your bodies as living sacrifices.* You no longer go to the temple and offer animal sacrifices; your life becomes a sacrifice of praise to God and a sacrifice of service to others.

Then the famous words: *Be not conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your minds.* Here’s another translation:

Do not let the world squeeze you into its mold, but let God remold your minds from within so that you may prove in your bodily lives what is the

will of God, what the purpose of God is for you, what is good and pleasing and perfect. This is your spiritual worship.

This is it: body, mind, spirit being shaped by God.

Are you a thermometer or a thermostat? Registering the temperature around you and living like that? Or setting the temperature for your life?

We're talking about living from the inside out.

Martin Luther King, speaking of living as a Christian in a world of hatred, racism, evil and injustice said we must be “morally maladjusted” to the world around us. *Be not conformed*. Do not adjust yourself to the way things are. Be brave enough to be a moral minority.

II

Next Paul talks about the church as a *charismatic community*. Don't get nervous. By that I mean a church organized and energized around *spiritual gifts*, in the greek *charismata*. The Church of the Savior in Washington does the best I know in organizing the church around spiritual gifts.

Paul gives examples. If you can preach, *preach*, but only according to the measure of faith given to you. In other words, don't preach more than you know—which would shorten a lot of sermons.

If you can minister, *minister*. The word is *diakonia* which means to serve, as a waiter serving tables, or an orderly emptying bed pans. We get the word deacon from it. So if you can “deac”, “*deac*”.

If you can teach, *teach*. If you can encourage others, *encourage*. This is a wonderful spiritual gift. The greek word is *paraclete*, to stand by someone, give them strength.

If you can *give money*, give so generously. If you can lead, *lead*. Lead diligently, Paul says. And lead as servant-leaders. In our world we have leaders who refuse to serve and servants who shy away from leading. Christ may be calling you to be a servant-leader.

Lastly, if you have the gift of compassion, the heart to help people, do so *cheerfully*. Who wants help from a grump? St. Teresa of Avila prayed: “Save us, O God, from sullen saints.”

The list is suggestive and not exhaustive, as all or Paul’s lists of spiritual gifts are. I, for example, think *hospitality* is a spiritual gift. As Henri Nouwen describes hospitality: The offering of a safe space where a person feels free to enter without fear and be who they are. I know people gifted in hospitality. And I know churches who practice it as one of their key spiritual gifts.

A church alive in the Spirit is busy about helping each other identify our gifts. A church can stifle the spiritual gifts of the congregation. We are called to help *release* the gifts of one another.

III

Paul now moves to what it looks like to follow Jesus and live “in Christ”.

Let love be genuine, he begins. Not fake, not for show. Genuine.

Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. We need both. William Sloane Coffin once said, “To love the good without hating evil is sheer sentimentality. To hate evil without loving the good just makes us damn good haters!”

Love one another with mutual affection. Love has to do with the heart, with the affections. A spirit-filled church is an affectionate church.

Outdo one another in showing honor. Let’s set up a holy competition: outdoing one another in showing honor. It is the opposite of our world which relishes tearing people down.

Three imperatives come next

Do not lag in zeal

Be ardent in the Spirit

Serve the Lord

We cannot serve the Lord well unless we are refreshed and energized in the Spirit.

Then there are three imperatives about how we carry on when we cannot see much progress for good—in the world or in ourselves.

Rejoice in hope

Be patient in suffering

Persevere in prayer

These are spiritual practices for the long haul, through good times and bad. Hope endures bad times because it believes God is still at work redeeming the world. We are patient in suffering—whether in body, mind or spirit—believing God is at work even *here*. *Be constant in prayer*, which is our long conversation with God. An old church covenant had these words: “We will...not omit the great duty of prayer, both for ourselves and for others.” That should be in every church covenant.

Then two phrases about giving to others in need:

Contribute to the needs of the saints

Extend hospitality to strangers

Saints and strangers: Those in need inside the church, and the most vulnerable in our community. The stranger is the one who is different, other, the immigrant, the child who is different, the person on the other side of the tracks. Racially different, economically different, religiously different. Our nation today is infected with *xenophobia*, the hatred or fear of one who is different. Paul promotes hospitality to the stranger. His word is *philoxenia*, love (philo) of the stranger (zenia). Can we become a community of *philozeniacs*?!

Next Paul begins to echo Jesus' words in the Sermon on The Mount:

Bless those who persecute you, bless them and do not curse them.

How do we do this? Only in so much as we are in Christ, and Christ in us.

Then Paul says:

Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

This is the mark of community. I think Grace is good at both, through the week and on Sundays as we pray.

There is a terrible perversion of spirit when this is reversed: We become glad with another's misfortune and grow sad with another's success. The Germans have a word for it: *Schadenfreude*, the pleasure in another's misfortune. It sells gossip magazines, it corrupts our spirit. When it begins to creep into our

crazy little hearts, *rebuke* it in the name of Jesus. Say, *Get your hell out of my heart*. Scram, Sam. Hop on the bus, Gus. Get on the tram, Pam. Set yourself free!
(To paraphrase another Paul, Paul Simon.)

Now this: *Being of one mind, live in harmony with one another*. Of one mind? Are you kidding? Here?! At Grace Baptist? But Paul is talking about the “mind of Christ.” “Have this mind among you which was in Christ Jesus”, Paul said to the Philippians. *His* mind.

But *harmony*, yes, with a few discordant notes to keep it interesting. In Ephesians 4:3 Paul says, “Be eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. It is, as I’ve said before, “unity in reconciled diversity.” And seek it *eagerly*, Paul says. I love that word here.

The Moravians have a slogan I like:

In essential things, unity

In non-essential things, diversity

In all things, charity.

(Of course we can argue over what is essential and what is non-essential.)

The next three imperatives are

Be not haughty

But associate with the lowly

Do not claim to be wiser than you are.

Here is revolutionary teaching: Associate with the lowly. Opposite of our ladder-climbing society. Associating with the lowly can help cure our haughtiness.

Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Good advice. We can all use some intellectual and spiritual humility.

Now Paul echoes Jesus again:

Do not repay anyone evil

But take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.

Spite is a terrible thing. And it can issue into spiteful action. Payback. Instead, Paul says, focus on the honorable, noble things of life. They are around us all the time.

Now we have an imperative that shows Paul's deep understanding of our human nature:

If it is possible, so long as it depends of you, live peaceably with all people.

Some things are not possible, some victories cannot be won. It takes two to tangle and two to tango. In our relationships we do all we can, then leave the rest to God.

Now Paul echoes Jesus again:

Beloved brothers and sisters, never avenge yourselves.

Stop the cycle of revenge. Instead, Paul says, “Leave room for the wrath of God.” For it is written Paul says, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35, “*Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.*”

God will set things right. The wicked will have their day, but their day will end. Paul’s point: Don’t become God’s vigilantes. Don’t take vengeance into your own hands. The world is filled with religious fanatics who see themselves as God’s avenging angels. It is a blight on God’s name. True justice is only safe in God’s hand, and God’s justice is always mixed with mercy.

Jesus said we are to love our enemy because that is what God is like, for God causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and unjust, the good and bad alike. Here is God’s impartial goodness to all.

Then Paul says, this time quoting Proverbs 25:21-2:

No, if your enemies are hungry, give food, if thirsty, give drink, for in so doing you will heap burning coals on their heads.

That doesn't sound very Jesus-y: Do good to your enemies; it will mess with their minds!

But have you felt your cheeks burn with shame when someone you've talked bad about did something good to you? Healthy shame can be transformational: I'll never do *that* again.

When in the 1960's during a civil Rights demonstration the police turned the fire hoses on children it shamed the hearts and minds of many Americans. We saw the heart of darkness in ourselves and in our nation. And the hot coals of shame brought repentance and change, personal and social.

Paul sums up with the words

Do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good.

Be careful when we fight evil we do not become like the evil we fight. Jesus' way is the way of *non-violent* resistance to evil and the healing power of love.

How then shall we live? Paul tells us here, and Jesus shows the way.