

Our Way of Life in the Church of Jesus
Romans 12: 3-21
September 26, 2020

Romans 12 is as good a picture of our way of life in the church of Jesus as I know. It should guide us here. It could be the basis of every church covenant.

I

Paul begins by talking about the different graces, or gifts of the Spirit, that we are given as members of the Body of Christ. And he starts with a little warning that shows that the church in Rome was as imperfect as any other church. Some quipped: “Don’t ever join the perfect church because it won’t be perfect anymore!” Paul said,

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.

It is so easy for some gifts to be more highly praised than others, and for some to think they and their gifts are more valuable.

Paul now describes the church as the Body of Christ, his favorite image of the church. We each, he says, are given gifts to help build up the church, different gifts but all vital. And yet they and we are all part of the same, *one*, Body. “Members of one another”, he says, living in mutual interdependence.

So Paul begins to list some of the spiritual gifts, or *charismata*.

-“If you can preach, preach!” he says, “but only in proportion to your faith.” In other words, Don’t preach more than you’ve been given by God! I’ve been there!

-“If you can minister to others, minister!”

-“If you can teach, teach!”

-“If you can exhort and encourage, exhort and encourage.”

-“If you can give of what you have, do so generously!”

-“If you can lead, do so with diligence!”

-“If you can offer compassion to another, do so *cheerfully*.”

Who wants dutiful, slightly grouchy compassion?

So we all have our own spiritual gifts, some listed here, but there are more, more than Paul or any of us can name. And we are given them not for ourselves, but to build up the church, enhance the life of the church. They are, thankfully, not all the same. Who wants a church full of preachers!?! There is a *diversity of gifts* which together serve the common good. *Unity in reconciled diversity*.

II

Now Paul moves into what I would call our *manner of life together in the Body of Christ*. They are a set of imperatives that describe how we are to live because of the grace we have received in Christ.

-“Let love be genuine.” We can usually tell if it is a put on.

-“Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.” We need to do both: deal with the evil within and without, and never let go of what is good, in us and in the world.

-“Love one another with mutual affection.” Affection is the glue that holds us together. Affection is at the heart of our best loving and best work.

-“Out do one another in showing honor.” I love this one. Let’s start a holy competition to see who can honor each other the most!

-“Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.” This is about growing in the love of God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength, keeping the light of this love glowing.

-“Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.” This speaks to the faith that “keeps on keeping on” no matter what we face. Hope keeps our faces turned to the good future God has planned for us—despite the evidence sometimes to the contrary around us. “We walk by faith, not by sight.”

-“Contribute to the needs of the saints.” Everywhere Paul went he took an offering for the poor in Jerusalem, and for other church’s too. Our earliest forms of Christian worship always included an offering for the poor. As we do every Sunday through our gifts to the church

-“Extend hospitality to strangers.” Open your home, your church, your hearts to people you do not know. They may be Jesus coming to visit. “Welcome everyone as if they are Christ”. That is the rule of hospitality in Benedictine monasteries. It should be for us too!

III

The rest of the chapter reads like a paraphrase of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, the heart of Jesus’ teachings. Yes, despite what some say, Paul did listen to Jesus.

-“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”
Who here needs a little more of *that* spirit?

“Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” We are members of one another. When one part of the Body hurts, we all hurt; when one part rejoices, we all rejoice! There is little uglier in the human spirit when the obverse happens: To rejoice at another’s misfortune, and to grow sad with another’s good fortune. “O, God,” we pray, “deliver us of that spirit!”

-“Live in harmony with one another.” Unison is good, but harmony is better! Harmony is spirit-filled diversity! Unity in the Spirit is not uniformity.

-“Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly; never be conceited.” There was a “downward bent” in Jesus life and ministry—and in ours as we live in him. *Action* is involved: the desire to associate with those called lesser or lower. There is no lesser or lower in the Kingdom of God.

-“Do not claim to be wiser than you are!” Oops. There’s a standard worth pursuing! In that most practical of New Testament books, James writes:

Who is wise and understanding? By their good life let them show their works in in the meekness of wisdom... the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits....

That’s true wisdom. Bragging about your wisdom proves you are not very wise.

-“Do not repay evil for evil but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” How do we love our enemies? First big step, don’t return evil for evil! As Ghandi said, “An eye for an eye turns the whole world blind.” And keep what is good and noble in life in your minds. Don’t let it get cluttered up with all that is wrong.

-“If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably, peaceably with all.” There is psychological as well as spiritual

guidance here. We can't make peace with everybody. The right conditions of the heart must be there in all parties. We are responsible for our thoughts, feeling, actions, not others! Some peace is not possible. Premature reconciliation can lead to harm. So, "If it is possible, in so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

IV

The next verses are about refraining from taking vengeance and leaving justice in the hand of God in whom only is justice perfect—and mixed with mercy.

-“Beloved, never avenge yourself but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ A lot of people want to take God’s place in administering judgment! Vigilantes for Jesus. Leave a little room for God to act! Trust hands that are better than yours.

-“No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them, if they are thirsty, give them a drink.” This sounds like Jesus, not just avoiding doing bad but doing good to your enemies. Then comes the head-scratcher: “For in so doing you will heap burning coals on their heads.” That doesn’t sound so much like Jesus. What does Paul mean?

In Frederick Buechner’s novel *Lion Country*, there is a slightly shady evangelist in Florida who has set up a Bible Institute to offer correspondence courses and where you can get ordained quick and cheap. His assistant Brownie is in charge of the Bible courses, and Brownie’s chief passion is to make all the hard passages of scripture easy to understand, all too easy, and easy to follow. When he interprets this passage from Paul, he says something like this.

The beloved Apostle Paul could not have meant that we do good to our enemies in order to make them feel bad! No, you must go back to the first century to understand. In those days women would get up before dawn and go to the village bakery

to get live coals and carry them home to light their own ovens. They put these coals in a vase which they carried on their heads back home. On cold mornings the warm of the coals gave them a nice warm feeling. So what the Beloved Apostle meant was that if you do good to your enemies it gives them a nice warm feeling inside.

Not so sure, huh?! Well, we can all remember those times we have had negative feeling about someone, held a grudge, maybe even gossiped about them, then later they go out of their way to do something nice to us. Then comes the hot feeling of shame!

But that's not the crux of it. The crux is in the next and last verse: "Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good!" Can you think of a better verse to carry with us these days with all that is going on around us? So, day by day let's give it a try! Write it on a slip of paper and carry it with you. And we do so because we have faith in a God who every day and through all history has been

doing this: Overcoming evil with good. Even with Jesus' death on a cross.

Amen