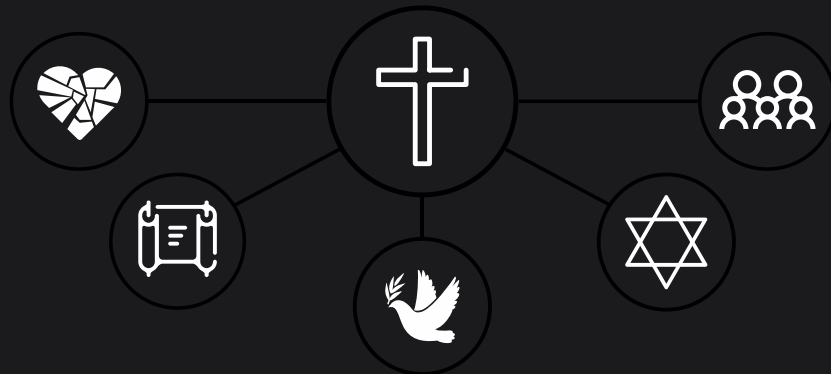




ROMANS AND THE FUTURE GOSPEL

ROMANS 1-7



Title: Romans and the Future Gospel

Text: Romans 12:3-21

Date: June 11, 2023

Main Idea: Because of our new, redeemed nature, we can love and serve one another with the gifts that God has given us.

Group Study Guide

*This lesson is for the Group Leader to use to teach the lesson and facilitate the discussion. It is not intended that you will use every question in this guide during your group time. You will likely only be able to cover 4-5 questions, depending on how discussion goes. This guide is longer than what you will need but provides the freedom and flexibility to pull questions out for discussion that will best serve your group time.

Discussion-Based Tip: You may want to pull one question from each section for discussion or spend more time on a particular section than another on. It's totally up to your discretion.

Lecture Tip: If your style is largely lecture style, you can use the headings and questions to make your main points for the text. Then as you teach, you could follow-up with application and apply questions sprinkled into the explanation of the text in your teaching. The answers are provided below.

There is also additional space after each section if you print the lessons and take notes.

Introduction

Icebreaker Question: What spiritual gift do you wish you had or would like to foster?

READ ROMANS 12:3-21

Highlight – What stands out?

If you're a discussion-based class, just choose 1-2 of these to answer.

1. What connecting word does Paul use in verse 3? How is it connected to what came before it?

“For”. Paul is connecting to everything that came before Romans 12:3 – namely that the implications of their living as living sacrifices, transformed by the renewal of the mind, is leading to right living.

2. What spiritual gifts does Paul list in verses 6-8?
Prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, contribution (giving), leadership and acts of mercy.
3. What stands out about the spiritual gifts listed in verses 6-8?
Paul presents two categories of spiritual gifts: (1) gifts of speaking (prophesying, teaching, exhortation) and (2) gifts of service (serving, contributing, leading, showing acts of mercy).

4. What does authentic love look like in verses 9-21?

Paul's recipe for true love includes sincerity (v9), discernment (v9), affection (v10), honor (v10), zeal (v11), patience (v12), generosity (v13), hospitality(v13), good will(v14), sympathy (v15), harmony (v16), and humility (v16).

Explain – What does this mean?

This passage is broken into two sections. In the first section (vv3-8), Paul gives a list of spiritual gifts and how believers should use them. In the second section (vv9-21), Paul gives a list of traits that characterize a Spirit-filled life.

Tip for Lecture Style: As you write your lesson, you can summarize these details and explain them in your lesson to your class.

Tip for Discussion Based: Read the verses and either explain to move into the discussion of application or spend some time in discovery as a class.

1. In verse 3, Paul emphasizes that believers should not let their spiritual gifts lead to misplaced pride. How can thinking wrongly about spiritual gifts negatively affect the Church? Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-21.
Comparison breeds envy and resentment. It can cause believers to devalue the spiritual gifts they have been entrusted with by God. Ultimately, this prevents the Church from functioning as God intended.
2. In verse 6, Paul's emphasis is on faithfully using spiritual gifts. How can thinking rightly about spiritual gifts positively affect the Church? Read Ephesians 2:8-10.
By focusing on using spiritual gifts, believers accomplish the good works that have been prepared for them in Christ. This allows the Church to function as God intended by spreading the gospel and making disciples.
3. In verse 9, Paul commands “[l]et love be genuine.” Based on verses 10-13, how does true love differ from false love?
True love is focused on benefiting others while false love primarily seeks its own interest. True love spends itself freely while false love is miserly. True love endures where false love retreats.
4. What does Paul mean when he says “Rejoice in hope” in verse 12? Read Romans 8:29-30.
The hope refers to the believer's ultimate destiny to one day share in the very glory of God. Believers can have confidence in this future hope because God guarantees salvation by the indwelling Spirit (Ephesians 1:13). Truly, our hope is built on nothing less than Jesus' blood and righteousness.

5. In verse 14, Paul commands “[b]less those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Based on verses 19 and 20, why are Christians called to love their enemies?

When believers seek personal justice, they are saying that they do not trust that God will give justice. Believers must have faith that God will judge all unrighteous deeds (Revelation 20:11-15). Showing mercy is a visible representation of how God patiently waits for people to be saved in the intervening time (2 Peter 2:9).

Apply – How does this change me?

(This is subjective based on the group and person, so take all you've learned and read and ask your class to explain this, starting with you as the leader.)

1. How should knowing that gifts are given to us (rather than chosen by us) affect the way we feel about them (ones we have, ones we don't have, and ones we wish we had)?
2. How has the use of your spiritual gifts changed with time?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 6:3-10. How does knowing that Paul was persecuted for Christ affect the way you understand the command in verse 14 to "[b]less those who persecute you"? How should it change you?
4. Which of the exhortations listed in verses 14-21 do you find difficult to do? Why?

Respond – What’s my next step?

1. Read verses 6-8 again. Who do you know that exemplifies one of these spiritual gifts? Reach out to them and encourage them this week?
2. Where do you struggle with showing genuine Christian love? Verse 5 says “so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” Since we are members of one of another, reach out and ask for prayer in your struggle with genuine love.

Teacher Tip in preparing your lesson. Try to summarize what Paul is saying in a few sentences before you read the commentary. That will help anchor your lesson, whether you’re discussion style or lecture style. Then use the commentary to reinforce what you have personally learned from the text. The John Stott commentary below is a supplement to the F.F. Bruce commentary you were given in August.

Commentary: taken from John Stott's commentary on Romans 12:3-21

Note to Group Leaders: You also have your F.F. Bruce Commentary on Romans you were given on Team Night. You can use that one, in addition to this one, to help you grasp the text. Reach out to Courtney Reissig if you need one or haven't received yours.

18. Our relationship to ourselves: thinking soberly about our gifts

12:3–8

The link between Paul's general appeal (1–2) and his particular instruction which now follows (3–8) seems to be the place of the mind in Christian discipleship. Our renewed mind, which is capable of discerning and approving God's will, must also be active in evaluating ourselves, our identity and our gifts. For we need to know who we are, and to have an accurate, balanced and above all sober self-image. A renewed mind is a humble mind like Christ's.¹

The formula Paul uses to introduce his exhortation to sober Christian thinking is impressively solemn. It 'has an imperative ring'.² *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you ...* (3a). 'I say to you' is reminiscent of Jesus' favourite expression, even without the 'Amen' or 'Verily' which often preceded it. Paul is addressing his Roman readers (every one of them, he claims) with the self-conscious authority of Christ's apostle. For the *grace given* him, which qualifies him to write as he does, must refer to his appointment as an apostle which he regularly attributed to God's grace (e.g. 1:5, 'grace and apostleship'; 15:15f.)³

His message to them is this: *Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment* (3b). The fourfold repetition in the Greek sentence of the forms of the verb *phronein*, 'to think', makes the emphasis unmistakable. In thinking about ourselves we must avoid both too high an estimate of ourselves and (Paul might have added) too low an estimate. Instead, and positively, we are to develop a *sober judgment*. How? First by reference to our faith, and secondly by reference to our gifts.

¹ Phil. 2:5ff.

² Dunn, vol. 38B, p. 720.

³ 1 Cor. 15:9f.; Eph. 3:7f.

The clause *in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you* (3c) is a well-known crux. C. E. B. Cranfield, with his customary thoroughness, says that 'measure' has seven possible meanings, 'faith' five, and 'of' two, making seventy possible combinations altogether! The main question is whether *metron* ('measure') means here an instrument for measuring or a measured quantity of something. If the latter is correct, as many think, the thought would be that God gives a varying amount of faith to different Christians, and, being a divine apportionment, this will keep us humble. Professor Cranfield argues, however, that *metron* here means 'a standard by which to measure ourselves'; that this for all Christians is the same, namely saving faith in Christ crucified; and that only this gospel of the cross, indeed only 'Christ himself in whom God's judgment and mercy are revealed', can enable us to measure ourselves soberly.⁴

If God's gospel is the first measure by which we should evaluate ourselves, the second is God's gifts. In order to enforce this, Paul draws an analogy between the human body and the Christian community. *Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function* (4), although (it is implied) the different functions are necessary for the health and enrichment of the whole, *so in Christ*, by our common union with him, *we who are many form one body* (5a). Although Paul stops short of saying that we 'are the body of Christ' (as he does in 1 Cor. 12:27), yet his assertion that we are 'one body in Christ' will have had enormous implications for the multi-ethnic Christian community in Rome. As one body, *each member belongs to all the others* (5b). That is, we are dependent on one another, and the one-anotherness of the Christian fellowship is enhanced by the diversity of our gifts. This metaphor of the human body, which Paul develops in different ways in different letters, enables him here to hold together the unity of the church, the plurality of the members and the variety of their gifts. The recognition that God is the giver of the gifts is indispensable if we are to 'form a sober estimate' (REB) of ourselves.

We have different gifts, Paul continues, *according to the grace given us* (6a). Just as God's grace had made Paul an apostle (3), so his grace (*charis*) bestows different gifts (*charismata*) on other members of Christ's body. Paul proceeds to give his readers a sample of seven gifts, which he urges them to exercise conscientiously for the common good. He divides them into two categories, which might be called 'speaking gifts' (prophesying, teaching and encouraging) and 'service gifts' (serving, contributing, leading and showing mercy).⁵

The first *Charisma* Paul mentions here is *prophesying*, that is, speaking under divine inspiration. In Ephesians 2:20 apostles and prophets are

⁴ Cranfield, vol. II, pp. 613f..

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

⁵ Peter makes the same distinction: 'If anyone speaks ... If anyone serves ...' (1 Pet. 4:11).

bracketed as the foundation on which the church is built.⁶ So this reference to foundation-prophets is likely to be to the biblical prophets, including those New Testament authors who were prophets as well as apostles, such as Paul⁷ and John.⁸ In two lists of *charismata*, however, prophets are placed in a secondary position to the apostles,⁹ suggesting that there was a lesser prophetic gift, subsidiary to that of the biblical prophets. Words spoken by such prophets were to be 'weighed' and 'tested',¹⁰ whereas the apostles were to be believed and obeyed, and no sifting process was deemed appropriate or necessary in their case.¹¹ Another difference seems to have been that prophets spoke to a local situation, whereas the authority of the apostles was universal. Further, Hodge was surely right in finding 'the point of distinction' in that 'the inspiration of the apostles was abiding', whereas 'the inspiration of the prophets was occasional and transient'.¹² It is in the light of these differences that we should understand the regulation which Paul here places on the exercise of the prophetic gift: *let him use it in proportion to his faith* (6b). Some think that this is a subjective restriction, namely that the prophet should speak only so long as he is sure of his inspiration; he must not add any words of his own. But it is more likely to be an objective restriction. In this case we should note that 'faith' has the definite article, and we should translate the phrase 'in agreement with the faith'. That is, 'the prophet is to make sure that his message does not in any way contradict the Christian faith'.¹³

The remaining six gifts are more mundane. *If it (sc. a person's gift) is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach* (7). *Serving* is *diakonia*, which is a generic word for a wide variety of ministries. For 'there are different kinds of service, but the same Lord'.¹⁴ It is highly significant, for example, that in Jerusalem the ministry of the Word by the apostles and the ministry of tables by the seven are both called *diakonia*.¹⁵ So whatever ministry-gift people have been given, they should concentrate on using it. Similarly, teachers should cultivate their teaching gift and develop their teaching ministry. This is arguably the most urgently needed gift in the worldwide church today, as hundreds of thousands of converts are pressing into the churches, but there are few teachers to nurture them in the faith.

⁶ Cf. Eph. 3:5.

⁷ 1 Cor. 13:2.

⁸ Rev. 1:3; 22:7, 18f.

⁹ 1 Cor. 12:28; cf. 14:37; Eph. 4:11.

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 14:29; 1 Thes. 5:19ff.; 1 Jn. 4:1.

¹¹ E.g. 2 Thes. 3:6ff.

¹² Hodge, p. 389.

¹³ Cranfield, vol. II, p. 621.

sc Seneca

¹⁴ 1 Cor. 12:5.

¹⁵ Acts 6:1ff.

Four more gifts are included in the next verse: *If it is encouraging, let him encourage* (8a). *Parakaleō* is a verb with a wide spectrum of meanings, ranging from encouraging and exhorting to comforting, conciliating or consoling. This gift may be exercised from a pulpit or platform ('the gift of stirring speech', NEB), or through writing (12:1), but more often it is used behind the scenes as 'the gift of counselling' (REB), or in offering friendship to the lonely and giving fresh courage to those who have lost heart. Barnabas, the 'son of encouragement', evidently had this gift and used it in befriending Saul of Tarsus.¹⁶

Next, *if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously* (8b). Calvin thought this was a reference to 'the deacons who are charged with the distribution of the public property of the Church',¹⁷ and it could certainly include these. But personal giving is involved, and this is to be done *en haplotēti*, meaning either 'with generosity', without grudging, or 'with sincerity', without ulterior motives.

If it is leadership, let him govern diligently (8c). The verb *proistēmi* can mean to 'care for' or 'give aid', and some commentators opt for this sense because this gift comes between 'contributing to the needs of others' and 'showing mercy'. But the more usual New Testament allusion is to leadership, whether in the home¹⁸ or in the church.¹⁹

Then finally, *if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully* (8d). Since our God is a merciful God (e.g. 12:1), his people must be merciful too. And to show mercy is to care for anybody who is in need or in distress, whether aliens, orphans and widows, who are often mentioned together in the Old Testament, or the handicapped, the sick and the dying. Moreover, mercy is not to be shown reluctantly or patronizingly, but *cheerfully*.

This list of seven spiritual gifts in Romans 12 is much less well-known than either the two overlapping lists in 1 Corinthians 12 (nine in the first list and eight in the second) or the short list of five in Ephesians 4:11. It is important to note both the similarities and the dissimilarities between them. First, all the lists agree that the *source* of the gifts is God and his grace, although in Romans it is God the Father, in Ephesians God the Son and in 1 Corinthians God the Holy Spirit. Being gifts of trinitarian grace (*charismata*), both boasting and envying are excluded. Secondly, all agree that the *purpose* of the gifts is related to the building up of the body of Christ, although Ephesians 4:12 is the most explicit, and 1 Corinthians 14:12 says that we should evaluate the gifts according to the degree to which they edify the church. Thirdly, all the lists emphasize the

NEB The New English Bible (NT, 1961, second edition 1970; OT, 1970).

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

¹⁶ Acts 4:36; 9:26ff.

¹⁷ Calvin, p. 270.

¹⁸ E.g. 1 Tim. 3:4f., 12.

¹⁹ E.g. 1 Thes. 5:12; 1 Tim. 5:17.

variety of the gifts, each seeming to be a random selection of them. But, whereas students of the 1 Corinthians lists tend to focus on the supernatural (tongues, prophecy, healing and miracles), in Romans 12 all the gifts apart from prophecy are either general and practical (service, teaching, encouragement and leadership) or even prosaic (giving money and doing acts of mercy). It is evident that we need to broaden our understanding of spiritual gifts.

19. Our relationship to one another: love in the family of God

12:9–16

A number of commentators have noticed that Paul's sequence of thought in Romans 12 resembles that in 1 Corinthians 12–13. 'The logic is that of 1 Corinthians 12–13', writes J. A. T. Robinson: 'from the fact of the body of Christ (vv. 4, 5 = 1 Cor. 12:12–27) to the diversity of ministry within it (vv. 6–8 = 1 Cor. 12:28–30) to the absolute and overriding requirement of love (vv. 9–21 = 1 Cor. 13).'¹

Without doubt *agapē*-love now dominates the scene. So far in Romans all references to *agapē* have been to the love of God—demonstrated on the cross (5:8), poured into our hearts (5:5) and doggedly refusing to let us go (8:35, 39). But now Paul focuses on *agapē* as the essence of Christian discipleship. Romans 12–15 are a sustained exhortation to let love govern and shape all our relationships. Soon Paul will write about love for our enemies (12:17–21), but first he portrays it pervading the Christian community (12:9–16). This is clear from his use of the words 'one another' (three times in verses 10 and 16), 'brotherly love' (10, *philadelphia*) and 'God's people' (13). Some commentators can see in verses 9–16 only a ragbag of miscellaneous instructions, a series of epigrammatic commands with little or no connection with each other. But in fact each staccato imperative adds a fresh ingredient to the apostle's recipe for love. It seems to have twelve components.

1. *Sincerity. Love must be sincere* (9a). The word 'sincere' translates *anypokritos*, 'without hypocrisy'. The *hypokritēs* was the play-actor. But the church must not turn itself into a stage. For love is not theatre; it belongs to the real world. Indeed love and hypocrisy exclude one another. 'If love is the sum of virtue, and hypocrisy the epitome of vice,' wrote John Murray, 'what a

¹ Robinson, p. 135.

contradiction to bring these together!² Yet there is such a thing as pretence-love, which was displayed in its vilest form in the betraying kiss of Judas.³

2. *Discernment. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good* (9b). It may seem strange that the exhortation to love is followed immediately by a command to hate. But we should not be surprised. For love is not the blind sentiment it is traditionally said to be. On the contrary, it is discerning. It is so passionately devoted to the beloved object that it hates every evil which is incompatible with his or her highest welfare. In fact, both verbs are strong, almost vehement. Love's 'hatred' of evil (*apostygeō*, unique here in the New Testament) expresses an aversion, an abhorrence, even a 'loathing' (REB), while love's 'clinging' to what is good (*kollaō*) expresses a sticking or bonding as if with glue.

3. *Affection. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love* (10a). Paul brings together in this verse two family words. 'Be devoted' translates the adjective *philostorgos*, which describes our natural affection for relatives, 'typically, love of parent for child'.⁴ The other word is *philadelphia*, 'brotherly love', which denotes the love of brothers and sisters for each other. Both words were applied originally to blood relationships in the human family, but Paul reapplies them to the tender, warm affection which should unite the members of the family of God.

4. *Honour. Honour one another above yourselves* (10b). This is the second 'one another' exhortation in the same verse. Love in the Christian family is to express itself in mutual honour as well as in mutual affection. It is uncertain, however, whether the command is to 'esteem others more highly than yourself' (REB, as in Phil. 2:3) or whether an element of competition is implied and we should translate 'outdo one another in showing honour' (RSV). In either case we are to accord to each other the highest possible honour.

5. *Enthusiasm. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord* (11). Religious 'enthusiasm' is often despised as fanatical. The word was applied in a derogatory way to the early Methodists in the eighteenth century, and R. A. Knox perpetuated the caricature in his historical study *Enthusiasm*. He portrayed 'enthusiasts' as perfectionists, given to exaggeration,⁵ who will tolerate 'no weaker brethren who plod and stumble'.⁶ But Paul has something different in mind when he bids the Romans not to flag (literally, 'be lazy') in zeal, for zeal is fine so long as it is according to knowledge

² Murray, vol. II, p. 128.

³ Lk. 22:48.

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

⁴ Dunn, vol. 38B, p. 740.

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

⁵ R. A. Knox, *Enthusiasm, A Chapter in the History of Religion* (Oxford, 1950), p. 581.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

(10:2). In telling the Romans to be ‘aglow with the Spirit’ (RSV, REB), he is almost certainly referring to the Holy Spirit, and the picture is not so much of a glowing lamp as of a boiling, bubbling pot. The additional clause (*servicing the Lord*) may well be meant as a ‘control or check in what might otherwise be interpreted as an invitation to unbridled enthusiasm’.⁷ Practical commitment to the Lord Jesus, as slave to master, will keep zeal rooted in reality.

6. *Patience. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer* (12). At the heart of this triplet is the reference to hope, namely our confident Christian expectation of the Lord’s return and the glory to follow (cf. 5:2; 8:24f.). It is to us the source of abiding joy. But it also calls for patience, as meanwhile we endure tribulation and persevere in prayer.

7. *Generosity. Share with God’s people who are in need* (13a). The verb *share* is *koinōneō*, which can mean either to share in people’s needs and sufferings, or to share out our resources with them. *Koinōnokos* means generous. One is reminded of the *koinōnia* in the early Jerusalem church, whose chief expression was that its members ‘had everything in common’ (*koina*) in the sense that they shared their possessions with those more needy than themselves.⁸

8. *Hospitality. Practise hospitality* (13b). If generosity is shown to the needy, hospitality is shown to visitors. *Philadelphia* (love of sisters and brothers) has to be balanced by *philoxenia* (love of strangers). Both are indispensable expressions of love. Hospitality was especially important in those days, since inns were few and far between, and those that existed were often unsafe or unsavoury places. It was essential, therefore, for Christian people to open their homes to travellers, and in particular for local church leaders to do so.⁹ In fact, Paul did not urge the Romans to ‘practise’ hospitality, but rather to ‘pursue’ it. Origen commented: ‘We are not just to receive the stranger when he comes to us, but actually to enquire after, and look carefully for, strangers, to pursue them and search them out everywhere, lest perchance somewhere they may sit in the streets or lie without a roof over their heads.’¹⁰

9. *Good will. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse* (14). Although our persecutors are outside the Christian community, and this verse anticipates verses 17–21, yet the call to bless them is a necessary challenge to Christian love. ‘Blessing’ and ‘cursing’ are opposites, wishing people respectively good or ill, health or harm. Paul must have known that he was echoing the teaching of Jesus, who told us not only to ‘bless’ those who curse

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

⁷ Dunn, vol. 38B, p. 753.

⁸ Acts 2:42ff.

⁹ 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8.

¹⁰ Quoted from Origen’s commentary on Romans by Cranfield, vol. II, p. 640, footnote 1.

us,¹¹ but also to 'pray' for them¹² and to 'do good' to them.¹³ There is no better way to express our positive wishes for our enemies' welfare than to turn them into prayer and into action.

10. *Sympathy. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn* (15). Love never stands aloof from other people's joys or pains. Love identifies with them, sings with them and suffers with them. Love enters deeply into their experiences and their emotions, their laughter and their tears, and feels solidarity with them, whatever their mood.

11. *Harmony. Live in harmony with one another* (16a). The Greek sentence reads literally: 'Think the same thing towards one another.' That is, 'be of the same mind', and so 'live in agreement with one another' (REB). The phraseology is almost identical with Paul's appeals to the Philippians to be 'like-minded' and 'one in spirit and purpose'.¹⁴ Once again we note the fundamental place occupied by our mind. Since Christians have a renewed mind (2), it should also be a common mind, sharing the same basic convictions and concerns. Without this common mind we cannot live or work together in harmony.

12. *Humility. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited* (16b). Few kinds of pride are worse than snobbery. Snobs are obsessed with questions of status, with the stratification of society into 'upper' and 'lower' classes, or its division into distinctions of tribe and caste, and so with the company they keep. They forget that Jesus fraternized freely and naturally with social rejects, and calls his followers to do the same with equal freedom and naturalness. As JB puts it, 'Never be condescending, but make real friends with the poor.'

What a comprehensive picture of Christian love Paul gives us! Love is sincere, discerning, affectionate and respectful. It is both enthusiastic and patient, both generous and hospitable, both benevolent and sympathetic. It is marked by both harmony and humility. Christian churches would be happier communities if we all loved one another like that.

20. Our relationship to our enemies: not retaliation but service

12:17-21

¹¹ Lk. 6:28a.

¹² Lk. 6:28b; Mt. 5:44.

¹³ Lk. 6:27.

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

¹⁴ Phil. 2:2.

JB The Jerusalem Bible (1966).

When we are moved by the mercies of God, and when our minds have been renewed to grasp his will, all our relationships become transformed. Not only do we offer our bodies to God (1–2), and develop a sober self-image (3–8), and love one another in the Christian community (9–16), but now also we serve our enemies (17–21). These have already appeared in the guise of our persecutors (14) and are about to reappear as evildoers (17). In fact, the last five verses of Romans 12 handle the question how Christians should respond to evildoers. Good and evil are contrasted throughout the whole context (e.g. 9, 17, 21 and 13:3–4).

The most striking feature of this final paragraph, if we add verse 14 which anticipated it, is that it contains four resounding negative imperatives:

1. 'Do not curse' (14).
2. 'Do not repay anyone evil for evil' (17).
3. 'Do not take revenge' (19).
4. 'Do not be overcome by evil' (21).

All four prohibitions say the same thing in different words. Retaliation and revenge are absolutely forbidden to the followers of Jesus. He himself never hit back in either word or deed. And in spite of our inborn retributive tendency, ranging from the child's tit for tat to the adult's more sophisticated determination to get even with an opponent, Jesus calls us instead to imitate him. To be sure, there is a place for the punishment of evildoers in the law courts, and Paul will come to this in Romans 13. But in personal conduct we are never to get our own back by injuring those who have injured us. Non-retaliation was a very early feature of the Christian ethical tradition,¹ going back to the teaching of Jesus,² and beyond this to the Old Testament Wisdom literature.³

The Christian ethic is never purely negative, however, and each of Paul's four negative imperatives is accompanied by a positive counterpart. Thus, we are not to curse but to bless (14); we are not to retaliate, but to do what is right and to live at peace (17–18); we are not to take revenge, but to leave this to God, and meanwhile to serve our enemies (19–20); and we are not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good (21).

If Paul's first antithesis between good and evil was 'bless and do not curse' (14), which we have already considered, his second begins: *Do not repay anyone evil for evil* (17a). Instead, we are to *be careful to do what is right (kala, 'good things') in the eyes of everybody* (17b), or 'see that your public behaviour is above criticism' (JBP). The reasoning seems to be that it would be anomalous to refrain from evil if at the same time we are not seen to be practising good. A further counterpart to retaliation follows, which is equally universal in its

¹ Cf. 1 Thes. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9.

² E.g. Mt. 5:39ff.; Lk. 6:27ff.

³ E.g. Pr. 20:22; 24:29.

JBP *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).

application (*everybody ... everyone*): *If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone* (18). To refuse to repay evil is to refuse to inflame a quarrel. But this is not enough. We have also to take the initiative in positive peacemaking,⁴ even if, as the two qualifications indicate ('if it is possible' and 'as far as it depends on you'), this is not always possible. For sometimes other people either are not willing to live at peace with us, or lay down a condition for reconciliation which would involve an unacceptable moral compromise.

Paul's third prohibition is: *Do not take revenge, my friends* (19a, *agapētoi*, 'beloved'; he assures them of his love because he is calling them to the way of love). To this negative Paul again opposes a positive counterpart, or actually two. The first is: *but leave room for God's wrath*. Because the Greek sentence means literally 'give place to wrath', without specifying whose wrath is in mind, some commentators have thought it was either the evildoer's ('let his anger run its course, give in to it') or the injured party's ('let your anger pass and not express itself in revenge'). But the quotation which immediately follows (*It is mine to avenge*) shows conclusively that the reference is to God's anger, and Paul has already made us familiar with this absolute use of 'the wrath' to indicate God's wrath (e.g. 5:9). The RSV renders it 'leave it to the wrath of God'. Paul goes on: *for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord* (19b).⁵ The word for *avenge* is *ekdikēsis*, meaning 'punishment'; it corresponds to the verb in verse 19, *do not take revenge*. Similarly, the verb *I will repay* corresponds to *do not repay* in verse 17. It is used of God's judgment, as when Jesus himself said that 'the Son of Man ... will reward each person according to what he has done'.⁶

These verbal correspondences between what is written of God and what is forbidden to us make Paul's point plain. The very two activities which are prohibited to us (retaliation and punishment) are now said to belong to God. The reason the repayment or judging of evil is forbidden to us is not that it is wrong in itself (for evil deserves to be punished and should be), but that it is God's prerogative, not ours. We are to 'leave it to the wrath of God', which is expressed now through the state's administration of justice, since the magistrate is 'God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer' (13:4), and which will be finally expressed on 'the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed' (2:5).

If the first counterpart to 'do not take revenge' is 'leave it to the wrath of God', the second is the command to serve our enemy: *On the contrary, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head'* (20).⁷ Because in the Old

⁴ Cf. Mt. 5:9.

RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT, 1946; second edition, 1971; OT, 1952).

⁵ Dt. 32:35.

⁶ Mt. 16:27.

⁷ Pr. 25:21f.

Testament it is said that God will 'rain fiery coals' on the wicked,⁸ some take the coals here as a symbol of judgment, and even argue that to serve our enemies 'will have the effect of increasing the punishment' which they will receive.⁹ But the whole context cries out against this explanation, especially the very next verse and its reference to overcoming evil with good. Others suggest that the pain inflicted by the burning coals is a symbol of the shame and remorse experienced by an enemy who is rebuked by kindness. A third option is that the coals are a symbol of penitence. Recent commentators draw attention to an ancient Egyptian ritual in which a penitent would carry burning coals on his head as evidence of the reality of his repentance. In this case the coals are 'a dynamic symbol of change of mind which takes place as a result of a deed of love'.¹⁰

The two positive alternatives to revenge, then, are to leave any necessary punishment to God and meanwhile to get busy in serving our enemy's welfare. These are not contradictory. Moreover, both are supported by Scripture. As REB puts it, 'there is a text which reads, "Vengeance is mine, says the Lord..." But there is another text: ' "If your enemy is hungry, feed him ..." ' (19–20). Our personal responsibility is to love and serve our enemy according to his needs, and genuinely to seek his highest good. The coals of fire this may heap on him are intended to heal, not to hurt, to win, not to alienate, in fact, to shame him into repentance. Thus Paul draws a vital distinction between the duty of private citizens to love and serve the evildoer, and the duty of public servants, as official agents of God's wrath, to bring him to trial and, if convicted, to punish him. Far from being incompatible with each other, both principles are seen operating in Jesus at the cross. On the one hand, 'when they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate'. On the other, 'he entrusted himself to him who judges justly', in confidence that God's justice would prevail.¹¹

The fourth antithesis of good and evil, which is also a summary of Paul's argument and the climax of the chapter, is verse 21: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*. A stark alternative is set before us; no neutrality, no middle way is envisaged. If we curse (14), repay evil for evil (17) or take revenge (19), then, because all these are evil responses to evil, we have given in to evil, been sucked into its sphere of influence, and been defeated, *overcome*, even 'overpowered' (JBP) by it. But if we refuse to retaliate, we can

⁸ Ps. 11:6; 140:10; cf. 2 Esdras 16:53.

⁹ Haldane, vol. 2, p. 574.

¹⁰ This is the conclusion of William Klassen's 'Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge?' *New Testament Studies* 9, 1962–3, p. 349, quoted e.g. by Murray (vol. II, p. 143), Morris (1988, p. 455) and Dunn (vol. 38B, p. 571).

REB The Revised English Bible (1989).

¹¹ 1 Pet. 2:23; cf. Ps. 37:5ff.

JBP *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).

instead 'take the offensive' (JBP), and practise the positive counterparts to revenge. Then, if we bless our persecutors (14), if we ensure that we are ourselves seen to be doing good (17), if we are active in peacemaking and peacekeeping (18), if we leave all judgment to God (19), and if we love and serve our enemy, and even win him over to a better mind (20), then in these ways we have *overcome evil with good*.

In all our thinking and living it is important to keep the negative and positive counterparts together. Both are good. It is good never to retaliate, because if we repay evil for evil, we double it, adding a second evil to the first, and so increasing the tally of evil in the world. It is even better to be positive, to bless, to do good, to seek peace, and to serve and convert our enemy, because if we thus repay good for evil, we reduce the tally of evil in the world, while at the same time increasing the tally of good. To repay evil for evil is to be overcome by it; to repay good for evil is to overcome evil with good. This is the way of the cross. 'Such is the masterpiece of love.'¹²¹

Additional Resources:

Sermon: [Tim Keller on Romans 12:1-8](#)

Course Notes and Lecture: [Mike Kruger on Romans 12](#)

Podcast: [Knowing Faith on Romans 12:9-21](#)

JBP *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).

¹² Godet, p. 439.

¹ John R. W. Stott, [The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 325–337.