



# An Overview of Paul's Letter to the Romans

## (13) The Christian Life

### Romans 12

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Romans 12. This begins the second-last section in Paul's letter to the Romans. This section, which includes chapters 12-15:13, deals with the concrete practical lifestyle implications of the gospel which Paul has outlined in chapters 1-11. The relationship between what comes before chapter 12 and what comes after chapter 11 is one of the most important points for our understanding of the Christian life and it is thus of great practical significance in our lives as Christians.

Paul makes this point by using the word "therefore" in verse 1 of chapter 12. The practical importance of the significance of that word "therefore" cannot be overstated. "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." This is a summary exhortation to live the Christian life. What it means is unpacked in the verses and chapters that follow. We are being exhorted to do and to not do many things. In some paragraphs the commands follow one another in quick succession. "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit serve the Lord...." And on and on and on it goes. Do this. Don't do that. All kinds of commands for specific things to do and to not to do.

But all of those commands are prefaced by the word "therefore." That means that they do not stand on their own. They can only be understood in the light of what has come before. They can only be

obeyed on the basis of what Paul has been talking about in the first 11 chapters. What Paul is talking about is the way of life that flows from the grace of God in the gospel. The Christian life flows from the gospel. It is what the gospel produces. And that is what gives exhortations and commands to do certain things and to refrain from doing other things within the Christian message their Christian character.

Christian living – Christian behaviour is motivated from within by love and thanksgiving and delight in the character of God. Paul appeals to his readers to obey the commands that he is going to give, “by the mercies of God.” That sums up what he has been writing about in the first 11 chapters. It is the message of justification by faith and being delivered from the power of sin by participating in the death and resurrection of Christ and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It is the message of being adopted into God’s family and being loved by God through Christ with a love that nothing can separate us from. The word “therefore” refers back to all of this and is the basis for the exhortations that follow.

And apart from that foundation, exhortations to obedience are actually counter-productive. Paul has even said earlier that the law apart from the gospel actually provokes sin. Exhortations to obedience that are not rooted in the gospel are not even Christian. This is what other religions do. This is what distinguishes Christianity from all other religions. In other religions the motivation for the life that they enjoy is to somehow make one’s self worthy of whatever god they are serving. In Christianity the exhortations to the Christian lifestyle are motivated by grace. The exhortations come after forgiveness and after the grace of release from the slavery to sin. They are motivated by forgiveness already given. They are enabled by the renewing power already given. They are motivated by love and thanksgiving and not by fear. This is one of the glories of the gospel and it is summarized in verse 1 of chapter 12. “I appeal to you therefore brother, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

We are to present our bodies as a living sacrifice to God. Paul here is not asking for a little response on our part. He is not asking for a part of our lives. He is asking for the whole thing. We are to present our bodies as

living sacrifices. We are to sacrifice the whole of our lives to God. And this, says Paul, is reasonable. Notice that the ESC has a footnote for the term “spiritual worship” and the footnote gives an alternate translation – “reasonable service.” The Greek word is word translated as “reasonable” is the word from which our word logic comes. Paul is saying that the logical conclusion of the gospel is that we offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God.

The gospel is very demanding in a roundabout kind of way. On the one hand, we can't earn the favor of God. We can't do any works to contribute to it. It is a free gift simply received by faith. But in the end that is a whole lot more demanding than if we could earn our own way. This logic is expressed well in the last verse of Isaac Watt's hymn “When I survey the Wondrous Cross.” “Were the whole realm of nature mine, that were a present far too small; love so amazing so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

That is what Paul is talking about here and this is the glory of Christian obedience. It is motivated by an appeal to the mercies of God. We obey because we want to. We obey because God has given himself for us. How can we not respond to that love by giving ourselves back to him? Paul makes the same point in 2 Corinthians 5:14 when he writes, “For the love of Christ controls us....” It is love that is the major motivator for living the Christian life.

The second verse is a summary statement of the Christian life. “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.” The great moral division of life is the division between the way of the world and the way of God. The way of the world is the way introduced by the devil by tempting Adam and Eve to sin and the story of the Bible is the story of how God delivers a people from the way of the world and its consequences. This is the great and fundamental divide between good and evil.

The gospel is about being delivered from the way of the world and its consequences which are all summarized by the word “death.” And the Christian life is the working out of the implications of that deliverance in our lives.

The way of the world has a certain shape. We are not to be conformed to that shape. We are to not to conform our lives to the way of the world - which is people living for themselves rather than for God. There is pressure to conform. The pressure comes from inside of us because of the sinful nature that remains in us and the pressure comes from outside of us because the world does not like nonconformists. The world wants us to fit in. This demand is expressed by scorn for Christian values and by condescending expressions about those who seek to live by them. There are all kinds of pressures for us to conform to the world. And one huge part of what it means to be a Christian is that we resist the pressure from within and without to conform. To be a Christian is to be a nonconformist when it comes to the values of the world living in rebellion against God.

Instead of being conformed to the world says Paul, we are to “be transformed by the renewal of your mind....” The goal of this transformation is to be conformed to the will of God because that is what is good and acceptable and perfect. That is the contrast. The way of the world and the will of God. That is also the contrast between good and evil – between sin and righteousness. God is the essence of goodness and righteousness. Any departure from the will of God is evil and ugly and destructive.

Now Paul says that the way we avoid being conformed to the world and transformed to discern the will of God is by the renewal of our minds. The Bible gives quite an emphasis to the renewal of the mind as a key factor in the renewal of our lives. According to Psalm 1 it is the man who meditates on the law, day and night, whose life is compared to “a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season.” Peter writes that we are to “long for pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation” (1 Peter 2:2). The milk is the word of God. It is the food by which we grow. That is what Paul is speaking about here when he speaks of being transformed by the renewing of our minds.

One of the key ways that we are transformed is by our minds being renewed by the word of God. God has given us his word and the word is addressed largely to our minds. But we must balance this biblical emphasis with other things that the Bible teaches about how we are

transformed. I just mentioned Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 5 that said that he was motivated by the love of Christ. We are not only to grow in knowledge, we are to grow in love and self-control. The biblical picture of transformation involves activities that shape our emotions and our will as well. The mind is very important also in these areas, but we are more than just minds. We are transformed by our actions. We are transformed by repeated actions or habits. We are transformed through the influence of relationships. Transformation is a complex phenomenon and there are many factors. We must avoid an understanding of the Christian life that is only intellectual – only head knowledge. Knowledge that does not affect our actions and our emotions is not the kind of transformation that God is looking for in our lives.

But the mind is very important when it comes to transformation and that is what Paul is emphasizing here. We need to grow in the knowledge of God and of his word. We need to read. We need to learn. We need to meditate. We need to discuss. That is what Paul is speaking about when he speaks about being “transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

I'm going to leave the rest of this first paragraph – otherwise we will not get through this chapter. But it is one of the key passages in Scripture about the Christian life.

The next section gets into specifics and its focus is on relationships within the community of believers – the body of Christ. It is important to note how the Bible emphasizes how we relate to other believers in its teaching about the Christian life. Certainly, the Christian life involves the cultivation of our inner life, but the great emphasis is on our relationships and especially relationships within the body of Christ. One of the central fruits of the gospel of salvation is love and harmony and service within the body of Christ.

Paul begins with humility and the context of this mention of humility is spiritual gifts which are given to serve the body. Verses 3-8 deal with spiritual gifts and the first thing that Paul mentions in this connection is that none of us is to “think of himself more highly than he ought to

think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”

One thing about Christians is that we are not all the same. Some have stronger faith than others and we all have different gifts. Some gifts are more visible and prominent. Other gifts are more in the background. In the light of this diversity of gifts and diversity of the strength of faith no one is to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment. One of the key points here is that everything we are and have comes from God. In 1 Corinthians 4:7 Paul writes, “What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it.”

That puts us all on the same level. Whatever gifts we have – whatever role we play – it all comes from God. That means that we’re not to take credit for it. We are in no way superior to any other believer. We are all the same when it comes to worthiness. We are all worthy of death. We are all saved by grace. Whatever gifts we have come from God. We are never to forget that.

But neither are we to deny the gifts that God has given us. We are to think of ourselves “with sober judgment.” “Sober judgment” is not pretending that we have no gifts. It is looking accurately and wisely at ourselves and our gifts. Part of what that means is spelled out in the next verse. Verse 4, “For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not have all the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.”

He is speaking about the body of Christ. Christians, together, make up the body of Christ. There is one body. We are all part of a bigger whole. The whole is more important than any single part. We are to use our gifts to serve the body and not ourselves. Each person’s gift is important and necessary. “[T]he members do not all have the same function....” Each part of the body has a different function. But each member is important for the functioning of the body. And not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think takes that into account. All the gifts are necessary. All the gifts are important. All the gifts are to work together for the proper function of the body. We are all part of something much bigger than ourselves and the purpose of any gifts that

we have is not to make us feel superior to the others, but to serve alongside them for the proper functioning of the body.

These verses deal with the relationship between the unity and the diversity of the body of Christ and the point is that for the unity to be expressed and maintained and nurtured, the differences between us must not serve to elevate one above another, but rather the differences must serve the body.

So, Paul writes in verse 6, "Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them." The purpose of the gifts that God has given us is that they be used for the good of the body and not so that we can think of ourselves more highly than we ought. And then Paul mentions a number of gifts: prophecy, service, teaching, exhorting, contributing, leading, and doing acts of mercy. This list is not meant to be comprehensive but representative of some of the gifts that God has given for the upbuilding of the Church. They are all important and all necessary and all given to contribute to the edification of the Church.

Next, we look at verses 9-13. This is a paragraph where Paul lists a whole bunch of short exhortations one after another. Many of them have to do with what it means to love one another. "Let love be genuine.... Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.... Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality." A huge part of the Christian life involves loving our fellow believers. And that is what Paul is emphasizing here. The key idea of love in the Bible is giving and serving other people. The pattern is the love of God in giving his Son for our salvation. 1 John 4:10-11 "In this is love, not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."

In this paragraph Paul teaches that love must be genuine. God not pleased with only a show of love. He is looking for the real thing. What this means is that love must be expressed in actions of service rather than just nice words. Genuine love is like God's love in giving Christ. It is sacrificial. It is costly. Paul also commands brotherly affection. In some situations, it is tempting to say that we love someone, but we do not like them. What we mean when we say that is that we are willing to

serve a certain person and seek their true wellbeing, but we don't really have any affection for them. Paul will not let us get away with that. Christian love is both service and brother affection. So, if there is someone that we are not naturally attracted to for one reason or another, we are to cultivate brotherly affection for that person. That may seem like a hard thing to do, but that is why we are to be transformed by the renewing of our mind. If our affections are disordered, we are to draw on the renewing power of the gospel and work at transformation by the renewing of our minds – that is we are to think long and hard about our feelings for that person in the light of the truths of the Bible.

And we are to be in competition with one another – not competition so that we will be honored, but competition on showing honor. We are to outdo one another in showing honor. We are to seek to be the best at showing honor to one another. And then contributing to the needs of the saints and showing hospitality. These are two more ways that we are called to love and serve one another.

The other category of exhortations in verses 9-13 have to do with a number of actions and attitudes that belong to the Christian life. “Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.... Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.” Clearly, we are to be “all in” when it comes to presenting our bodies as living sacrifices to God. If you think of a list like this, it can make you tired. There are so many aspects. There are so many things that we are to give our attention to. And we are to do so zealously and fervently.

This is where we need to remember that this is not a part time job. The kind of life that Paul is exhorting us to requires that we give ourselves wholly to it. It involves effort. It requires zeal. It demands we are engaged with all our heart. And the only way that we can keep from being overwhelmed is by remembering that these exhortations are rooted in the gospel. God in Christ has sacrificed for us and our response to that is to be an inner desire to love and serve and please the one who has given us so much. If we lose the connection to the gospel, all these commands are overwhelming. It is through the gospel



that we are given the inner drive to give ourselves wholly to living for God.

Finally, in verses 14-21, Paul deals with how we are to relate to the world. The distinction is not absolute. Some things in this paragraph concern our relationships with Christians, but most of it has to do with dealing with those who hate us and persecute us. An important part of the Christian life has to do with our response to opposition. If we are not conforming to the world, the world takes exception to that and the result is persecution of various levels and intensities. It ranges from insults and being viewed as odd and different to physical and economic harm and even prison and death. The world really hates God and that hatred is expressed in various ways against the people of God.

So, dealing with that hatred is an important part of the Christian life. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.... Live in harmony with one another.... Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written ‘Vengeance is mine,’ I will repay, says the Lord.” This is a very important passage about how to deal with being wronged by others. It combines non-retaliation with justice. We are to bless those who persecute us and not to avenge ourselves, but that does not mean that injustice will prevail. God will take care of the justice part. And we are to rest in that.

So, we’ve touched on most of the things in this chapter. Not all of them because there are so many. It is a chapter packed with specific exhortations having to do with living the kind of life that we are saved to live. It is a demanding life. It is a life that requires grace even to begin to live. None of this comes naturally to us as people who have a sinful nature, but at least beginning to live this way is the result of the grace of the gospel. “Love so amazing, do divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

In order to be enthusiastic about the vision that Paul presents in these verses for the Christian life, we must live by the gospel. Think back to chapter 5 where Paul spoke of “the grace in which we stand.” Being confronted with the high calling of the Christian life will confront us with how far short we come. Who can read a passage like this and think, “I’m

doing a pretty good job.” Remember, “since we have been justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

But at the same time part of the blessing of the gospel is that we are changed in our inner being so that we are dead to sin and alive to God. That means that we are attracted to God and the kind of life that is the right way and the blessed way to live. As those with new hearts we will look at all of these exhortations and see them as good – wise – life-affirming and the way of fulfillment and joy. This is what God’s grace produces in his people. And so, let us hear the word of the Lord from this passage and instead of being overwhelmed let us rest in the forgiving grace of God in Christ where we come short and let us be motivated to give ourselves more fully to the high calling that is the Christian life remembering that our motivation is love and thanksgiving for the God who has given us so much.