

Rom. 12:1 – 13:14

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V. Transforming Power of the Gospel: Christian Conduct (12:1-13:14)

A. The general call to a transformed life (12:1-2)

1. In light of the mercies (or compassions) of God, Paul urges them to present to God the "sacrifice" of a consecrated life, a life that is dedicated to God and pleasing to him.

a. The "mercies of God" refers to all that Paul has written about God's working, which he just summarized in 11:30-32.

b. The figure of a sacrifice is appropriate because holy living is something willingly offered in devotion to God.

c. Paul says that this kind of living, this figurative sacrifice, is our "reasonable (or understanding) service" to God. It is the appropriate response of rational or reasoning creatures to the God of mercy. See, Isa. 1:2-3; Deut. 10:12-13.

(1) There are translation issues regarding both words in NIV's phrase "spiritual worship." *Logikos* may mean spiritual, rational, appropriate, or reasonable (Mounce, 231, n. 8). *Latreia* may mean either service or worship (Morris, 434, n. 11).

(2) Most commentators understand *latreia* in this verse as "worship," but as Everett Harrison notes in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (p. 128), "worship" may be too restricted a rendering in this context. He favors "service" here because it covers the entire range of the Christian's life and activity. The word is translated "service" in the KJV, ASV, NKJV, and in a footnote in ESV. The standard Greek lexicon, BDAG, suggests "thoughtful service" for the phrase (*logikēn latreian*) in Rom. 12:1.

d. But however one translates *latreia* here, I think it is a mistake to read Paul as saying there is no longer a place for more specific and direct acts of worship carried out at certain times and locations. Paul simply means that, as was true in the O.T., this more specific worship must be practiced as part of the wider worship or service embracing the whole of the Christian's life. Otherwise, it is unacceptable to God. As C. E. B. Cranfield says in his acclaimed commentary (his parenthetical comments omitted):

Paul's use of the word *latreia* implies that the true worship which God desires embraces the whole of the Christian's life from day to day. It implies that any cultic worship which is not accompanied by obedience in the ordinary affairs of

life must be regarded as false worship, unacceptable to God. But it would be quite unjustifiable to argue that the logical implication of Paul's use of *latreia* here is that no room is left for a Christian cultic worship carried out at particular times and in particular places. Provided that such worship in the narrower sense is always practised as part of the wider worship embracing the whole of the Christian's living and is not thought of as something acceptable to God apart from obedience of life, there is nothing here to deny it its place in the life of the faithful. Cranfield (1979), 601-602.

e. Likewise, Michael Thompson, a lecturer in N.T. at Cambridge, remarks¹:

The apostle urges a way of life as a whole, identified as a right-minded worship or service. In doing so, he no doubt expands our understanding of what kind of worship God values. True worship is inseparably connected with Christian behaviour in general. But it is a logical fallacy to conclude from this text that he redefines worship as, or reduces worship to, Christian ethics – any more than Hosea's commendation of love and knowledge over sacrificial offerings (Hos. 6:6) proves that the prophet was calling for an absolute end to form and ritual.

2. We are not to be molded to fit the godlessness of this age, but rather we are to be transformed by a Spiritual reprogramming of our minds so that we can ascertain the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God by which we are to live. Though the Greek word *dokimazō* usually has the sense of "test, examine, approve," in 12:2 it shades into "ascertain" or "discern," which is how it's translated in the NEB, NJB, NRSV, and ESV. As James Dunn states, what is in view in Rom. 12:2 is the capacity of forming the correct Christian ethical judgment at each given moment.

a. This reprogramming is an ongoing, lifelong process. In the vernacular, we constantly will be "getting our mind right."

b. The more we think as God wants us to think, the greater insight we will have into how God wants us to live. We will be able to comprehend more clearly and deeply God's moral direction.

B. Humility and mutual service (12:3-8)

1. Part of God's will for our lives is that we not have an inflated view of own importance, especially in relation to our brothers and sisters in the Lord. Rather, we are to gauge ourselves in relation to fellow saints by the "yardstick (or standard) of faith" which God has revealed to each of us in the gospel.

¹ Michael B. Thompson, "Romans 12:1-2 and Paul's Vision for Worship" in Markus Bockmuehl and Michael B. Thompson, eds., *A Vision for the Church* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 127.

a. In other words, faith is the thing that matters, and since we all stand before God through the same faith in Christ, evaluating by that standard eliminates false notions of superiority and inferiority that stratify the body of Christ.

b. This is preferable to taking the term "measure" as a measured quantity of faith that is dispensed by God in different amounts to different individuals. That would promote rather than suppress notions of superiority and inferiority.

2. Paul backs up the exhortation that believers not have an inflated view of themselves by analogizing them to the human body. Christians are all part of the one body of Christ, but the various parts of that body perform different functions. Since all parts contribute to the whole, no particular part should see itself as superior.

a. I agree with Dunn (and NRSV) that these verses should not be translated as commands. I favor: ⁶*but having different gifts according to the grace given to us; whether prophecy [exercised] in agreement with the faith,* ⁷*or service [exercised] in the ministry; or the one who teaches [gifted] in teaching,* ⁸*or the one who encourages [gifted] in encouragement; the one who shares, in generosity; the one who gives aid, in eagerness; the one who shows compassion, in cheerfulness.*

b. Prophecy is to be exercised "in agreement with the faith" (the translation suggested by BDAG), in a way consistent with the Christian faith. I think this probably means in accordance with the kinds of conditions Paul mentioned in 1 Cor. 14:29-33a.

c. I do not believe the Spirit is choosing to give the church today all the same gifts he gave to her in the first century. In other words, I believe some of the gifts have ceased, including the gift of prophecy. Regarding prophecy, consider the following:

(1) There is no indication that all gifts will continue until the consummation, so there is no reason *to insist* that they have. Since the Spirit is sovereign, it is certainly possible that he chose to stop giving certain gifts. This kind of change is not unprecedented. It was widely believed by Jews that the gift of prophecy ceased not long after the last book of the O.T. was revealed.

(2) Eph. 2:20 indicates that both apostles and prophets played a foundational role in establishing the church. We know that the apostles passed from the scene after fulfilling that role, so one would expect the same thing to happen to the prophets. This is consistent with the concept of a foundation. They were the instruments of God's new revelation, and once that foundation had been laid, their job was complete; the church would then build on their message.

(3) The precedent of the O.T. supports the idea that the completion of N.T. Scriptures would have an effect on the work of the Spirit, particularly with regard to revelatory gifts. As mentioned, it was generally recognized in Judaism that divine inspiration ceased not long after the last book of the O.T. was revealed.

(4) This in no way means that God is any less powerful today than yesterday. It is not a matter of power but a matter of divine choice.

3. Of course, Paul's point has nothing to do with the duration of the spiritual gifts. He is supporting his exhortation that Christians not think too highly of themselves, especially in relationship to one another.

C. General ethical counsel (12:9-21)

1. Emphasis on Christian relationships (12:9-16)

a. Christian love is to be genuine, not fake. We are not to be two-faced where we act committed to another's welfare but then seek to harm them or simply harm them through neglect.

b. We are to hate (exceedingly) what is evil and cling to what is good. It is not virtuous to be apathetic toward or accepting of wickedness, and it is not loving to ignore evil in our brothers' and sisters' lives. Real love requires us not to wink at such things.

c. We are to have a family-like affection (or devotion) toward one another, and we are to show the way to one another in the matter of respect. We are not to treat any brother or sister as though they're "a nobody."

d. We are not to be lacking in zeal; rather, we are to be fervent in spirit. We are not to be "ho hum" about serving the Lord.

e. And our zeal is to be rightly directed. With it, we are to "serve as a slave to the Lord." One aspect of that is being zealous in terms of the will of the Lord as revealed in Scripture.

f. We are to rejoice in the hope that is ours in Christ, remain steadfast in the face of affliction, and persevere in prayer (which will certainly affect our doing the others).

g. We are to share our material things with saints in need. We are also to "pursue" hospitality, that is, go out of our way to welcome and provide for traveling brothers and sisters. Craig Keener comments in *The Bible Background Commentary*, "In antiquity 'hospitality' meant putting up travelers (without charge) in one's home while they were in town; they would normally carry letters from those trusted by their hosts, attesting that they were to be accepted as guests."

h. We are to bless those who persecute us, meaning we are to call on God to bestow his favor on them. This is the same thing Jesus said in Mat. 5:44 and Lk. 6:27-28.

i. We are to rejoice with our brothers and sisters who rejoice, and we are to weep with those who weep. As Paul said in 1 Cor. 12:26, "And if one member suffers, all the members suffer together; and if one member is honored, all the members rejoice together." Genuine love will not respond to a fellow believer's joy with envy or bitterness. And that kind of love will cause us to identify so intimately with our brothers and sisters in Christ that their sorrows will become ours.

j. Paul says that we are to "be like-minded *toward* one another" (rather than "among" or "along with" one another), which suggests that his point in this context is that, whatever our social, ethnic, or economic status, we are to view each other with a mutual respect and with a mutual appreciation of value and worth. The NEB translated the phrase: "have equal regard for one another."

k. We are not to think we are too good for "humble duties" (if take adjective as neuter – lowly things) or "lowly people" (if take as masculine), rather we are to associate with them. We are not to have a "big head," not to be wise in our own estimation.

2. Emphasis on relationship with the world (12:17-21)

a. We are to repay no one evil for evil. And we are to be seen by all people as having regard for "noble things." In other words, we are to be conscious of how our conduct looks to the outside world. (An alternative view is that we are to have regard for what all people see as "noble things" that we might not be needlessly offensive.)

b. Though the world is opposed to us, we are to do all we can to live at peace with the world. We must not compromise what God has called us to, but neither can we gratuitously alienate the lost.

c. When we are wronged, we are not to retaliate or seek revenge against the wrongdoer. Rather, we are to allow God to deal with them. Paul is not talking here about using courts to resolve civil disputes with non-Christians; he is talking about personal revenge and punishment.

(1) As he says in chap. 13, governmental authority has been established by God for the administration of justice, so I do not see how it would be against God's will to avail ourselves of it.

(2) Paul did not hesitate to use the rights he had under Roman law. He used the fact he had been illegally beaten to insist that he and Silas be personally escorted out of the jail in Philippi (Acts 16:35-39). He also appealed to have Caesar hear his case rather than allow himself to be handed over to the Jews by Governor Festus (Acts 25:6-12).

(3) Civil litigation is about compensation rather than punishment. (Of course, if civil litigation was employed for the purpose of retaliation or punishment, that would be a sinful spirit.)

d. We are to love our enemies and seek their welfare that we might lead them to be ashamed of their conduct toward us and, perhaps, to repent and turn to the Lord whose love we embody. "Coals of fire" as a metaphor for "burning pangs of shame" may go back to an Egyptian practice of carrying a tray of burning coals on one's head as a sign of contrition, though other suggestions for the origin of the metaphor as a reference to shame have been proposed.

D. Submission to secular rulers (13:1-7)

1. Part of the holy life we are to present to God in this overlap of ages is our submission to governing officials who have authority over us. One can well imagine Christians, who were reading the "now" too much in terms of the "not yet," arguing: "The old age has passed away; we are 'a new creation in Christ' and belong to the transcendent, spiritual realm. Surely we, who are even now reigning with Christ in his kingdom, need pay no attention to the secular authorities in this defunct age" (Moo, 791).

2. Paul says that Christians must submit to the governmental authorities because they have been established by God. To oppose them is to resist God's directive, his grant of authority to them, and those who do so will receive judgment. You see, God has established certain institutions in this world, such as marriage and government, that have a positive role to play *even after* the inauguration of the new age.

a. Our submission to the governmental authorities does not depend on their goodness. It depends only on the fact they are in the position of authority. See, 1 Pet. 2:13-17. Nero was the Emperor when Paul wrote this, and he certainly was an evil man.

b. God sometimes brings or allows evil people to come to power for various reasons. Paul has already mentioned (9:17) that God raised up the wicked Pharaoh that God might be glorified through displaying his power against him. And Jesus told Pilate in Jn. 19:11 that he would have no authority over him if it were not given to him from above. See also, Dan. 4:17, 25, 32.

c. But God holds these evil rulers accountable for their wickedness. Daniel 4 tells us that God caused the great king Nebuchadnezzar to lose his mind so that he wound up living like a wild animal. It was not until he repented that his rule was restored to him. And though God used the Assyrians to punish Israel and the Babylonians to punish Judah, he poured out his wrath on the wickedness of those nations (e.g., Isaiah 10; Habakkuk). Their ultimate punishment, of course, will be in the judgment.

d. It goes without saying that Christians cannot obey governmental authorities when to do so would mean disobeying God. As Peter and the other apostles put it to the

Sanhedrin in Acts 5:29, "We must obey God rather than men!" Otherwise, we would be placing government over God, which is idolatry. Paul does not mention that fact here because the issue was whether the saint should submit to the authority of the state at all.

e. There are notable examples in Scripture of this kind of civil disobedience.

(1) When Pharaoh ordered the Hebrew midwives to kill the newborn boys, they refused to obey. Ex. 1:17

(2) When Nebuchadnezzar ordered all his subjects to fall down and worship his golden image, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to obey. Daniel 3.

(3) When King Darius decreed that for thirty days no one should pray to any god or man, except himself, Daniel refused to obey. Daniel 6.

(4) When the Sanhedrin banned preaching in the name of Jesus, the apostles refused to obey. Acts 4:18 ff.

3. The rulers do not cause fear in those who submit to their authority (do good work) but in those who rebel (do evil). If you wish not to fear the authority, then be a loyal citizen (do good), and you will be praised. For the authority is God's servant for your benefit (via maintaining social order).

a. It is clear from this that there is no inherent conflict between government employment and Christian discipleship. God established governmental authority within human society (to bless mankind by providing social order), so one who serves in the government is God's servant. To the extent one fulfills one's role in government consistently with Christian ethics, one is working with God not against him.

b. In Rom. 16:24, Erastus, one of the Christians who sends greetings to the saints in Rome, is identified as a financial officer within the local government of Corinth, the city from which Paul wrote. Likewise, in Phil. 4:22 those "who belong to Caesar's household" are among the Christians who send greetings to the saints in Philippi. Those Christians were members of the emperor's civil-service staff.

4. But if you rebel (do evil), be afraid, for he has the power to punish. For he is God's servant, an agent of wrath against the one practicing rebellion (evil).

a. This text is relevant to the question of whether the death penalty is immoral per se. There is debate over the exact background and significance of the phrase "wear the sword" in v. 4. Keener says in *The Bible Background Commentary*: "'The sword' refers to the standard method of execution in this period (beheading); in earlier times the ax had been used. Swords were carried in front of Roman officials to indicate their authority over life and death."

b. But even if the phrase refers only to the right of the government to punish those who violate its laws, rather than referring directly to the infliction of the death penalty, Moo states: "[B]ut in the context of first-century Rome, and against the OT background (Gen. 9:4-6), Paul would clearly include the death penalty in the state's panoply of punishments for wrongdoing."

5. So it is necessary to be subject to the authority, not only because of potential punishment but also because of conscience (the authority having been established by God).

6. Paying tribute (direct taxes) is even a matter of conscience because authorities are God's ministers when attending to tax collection (or, perhaps more broadly, when attending to government service generally).

7. We are to pay to everyone the debts owed, whether direct taxes, indirect taxes (customs duties, fees, etc.), respect, or honor. Governments restrain anarchy and serve the basic needs of the masses, so it is no justification for withholding payment of taxes that they also use that money for things we cannot endorse. That is their responsibility.

E. Love and the law (13:8-10)

1. Paul plays off his comment in v. 7 that every debt should be paid, and says the only exception is the debt to love one another. That is the one debt we must never stop owing. As the third-century theologian Origen put it, "Let your only debt that is unpaid be that of love – a debt which you should always be attempting to discharge in full, but will never succeed in discharging."

2. If you love your neighbor, you will do him no harm. That means you will not commit adultery, you will not murder, you will not steal, you will not covet, or do anything like that. You see, all these commands are summed up in the command, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." The commands are simply specific ways in which love does no harm, so love fulfills the law in that love does what the law demands.

3. The fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (Gal. 5:14; Rom. 13:8-10; Mat. 7:12, 22:37-40), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. These definite requirements are included within the "law," within the set of commands under the Mosaic covenant. So the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included within that law.

F. Living in light of the day (13:11-14)

1. Now is no time to be lax in our discipleship because we are closer to the end (whenever that may be) than when we first believed. Each new day gives more reason to be diligent, not less. It's like Mr. Pop when you can't see the timer. Since you *know* it's coming, the longer you wait the greater the sense of urgency.

2. Verse 12a ("The night progressed, and the day has drawn near") may be a phrase from a traditional baptismal liturgy where the one entering the faith (when they "first believed") was told that, with Christ's coming and ministry, the day of salvation had been brought "near." In other words, it's not a statement that the consummation had "drawn near" while the Roman Christians had been waiting but that it had drawn near in the work of Christ. The former would imply the consummation was "near" in comparison to how long they had been waiting; the latter means only that it was "near" in a theological or eschatological sense.

a. The "day of salvation," meaning the consummated kingdom, was brought near with the ministry of Christ in that the last event in God's plan to precede the consummation had taken place. History from that point has been on the threshold of consummation, poised for its occurrence, however long it should take to occur.

b. As John Stott puts it:

[W]hat the apostles did know is that the kingdom of God came with Jesus, that the decisive salvation events which established it (his death, resurrection, exaltation and gift of the Spirit) had already taken place, and that God had nothing on his calendar before the parousia. It would be the next and the culminating event. So they were, and we are, living in "the last days." It is in this sense that Christ is coming "soon" (16:20). We must be watchful and alert, because we do not know the time.

3. Since the consummation is closer now than at any time in the past, we need, more than ever, to live in light of that day. There is no place for such things as sexual immorality, drunkenness, strife, and jealousy. Rather, we are to become more like Jesus, and make no provision for the lusts of the flesh.

4. The sad fact is that so many Christians fail to take this seriously. Ronald Sider writes in his book *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience* (excerpted in *Books & Culture*, January/February 2005):

Once upon a time there was a great religion that over the centuries had spread all over the world. But in those lands where it had existed for the longest time, its adherents slowly grew complacent, lukewarm, and skeptical. Indeed, many of the leaders of its oldest groups even publicly rejected some of the religion's most basic beliefs.

In response, a renewal movement emerged, passionately championing the historic claims of the old religion and eagerly inviting unbelievers everywhere to embrace the ancient faith. Rejecting the skepticism of leaders who no longer believed in a God who works miracles, members of the renewal movement vigorously argued that their God not only had performed miraculous deeds in the past but still miraculously transforms all who believe. Indeed, a radical, miraculous "new birth" that began a lifetime of sweeping moral renewal and transformation was at

the center of their preaching. Over time, the renewal movement flourished to the point of becoming one of the most influential wings of the whole religion. . . .

Then the pollsters started conducting scientific polls of the general population. In spite of the renewal movement's proud claims to miraculous transformation, the polls showed that members of the movement divorced their spouses just as often as their secular neighbors. They beat their wives as often as their neighbors. They were almost as materialistic and even more racist than their pagan friends. The hard-core skeptics smiled in cynical amusement at this blatant hypocrisy. The general population was puzzled and disgusted. Many of the renewal movement's leaders simply stepped up the tempo of their now enormously successful, highly sophisticated promotional programs. Others wept.

This, alas, is roughly the situation of Western or at least American evangelicalism today.

Scandalous behavior is rapidly destroying American Christianity. By their daily activity, most "Christians" regularly commit treason. With their mouths they claim that Jesus is Lord, but with their actions they demonstrate allegiance to money, sex, and self-fulfillment.