

Romans 12:1-21

Introduction

Chapter 12 begins the “so what” in terms of daily community life for Paul’s audience. But who makes up this community? Paul’s teaching in the following chapters needs to be kept in the context of what had been said earlier in this letter. It is a mistake, as is often made, to separate chapters 12-15 from the earlier portion of Romans. Paul probably intended 12-15 to be viewed as the daily application of chapters 1-8 and in particular 9-11. The least likely approach to this section is to see it as instruction for Christian’s daily living among the unbelieving world with no connection to the previous chapters.

A common approach is that these chapters addressed a tense relationship between Jew and Gentile Christ-followers. An even more likely, but less common, approach suggests these instructions are directed to primarily Gentile Christians regarding their place in God’s plans for hardened Israel. This was the group Paul specifically addressed and challenged regarding their understanding of God’s relationship with hardened unbelieving Israel beginning in 11:13. The following thoughts on chapters 12-15 will be directed toward showing how this understanding fits in the context, while admitting the more common understanding has merits as well. What will be said will certainly apply to either.

It is not known for sure what relationship the Christian community had with the non-believing synagogue community in Rome at the time of Paul’s writing. Some of the uncertainty revolves around how the expulsion of Jews from Rome recorded in Acts 18:2 effected the synagogue community at the time of Paul’s writing. Most Gentile Christ-followers had probably been a part of the synagogue structure as godfearers. This is why they would have been able to follow Paul’s argument in Romans, having learned OT scripture there. We do know that in many places the Christian community and synagogue remained connected at least into the middle of the second century.

Paul did not want Jewish or Gentile Christ-followers to think God had permanently abandoned Israel. Believing God’s work among Gentiles was designed to make Israel jealous, Paul’s instruction here very likely was an encouragement for the Christian community to continue to live within or at least have peaceful relationships with the synagogue community with the hope that rejected Israel might eventually accept Jesus as Messiah. We know from 9:1-5 that Paul desperately wanted Israel to embrace Jesus.

One thing to notice is that a number of words and phrases in chapters 12-15 connect back to chapters 9-11.

Transformed life: 2:1-2

Being recipients of the mercies of God as describe in the previous chapters should spur on the Christian community to pursue a new way of living. They are now a redefined people consisting of Jew and Gentile equally experiencing the covenant blessings of God with the understanding that God has plans to again pour out His mercies upon unbelieving, hardened Israel (11:30-31).

Paul used sacrificial language to make his point (“*present* your bodies”). The idea of a living sacrifice is an oxymoron. By their very nature, sacrifices die. This goes back to the idea of having died with Christ so that we will live with Him in chapter 6. As Israel and other religions would have presented an animal for sacrifice, the Christian community was to present their whole being to God as sacrifice. Every aspect of how they lived in the world (and among hardened Israel) was to be a sacrifice to the glory of God. Ritual is important to any group identity. Even though this is not some formal community religious ritual as would normally be understood, a community of people living godly daily lives in a hostile environment is critical to group identity.

The sacrifice of one’s life is “holy” (consecrated to God) just as was any OT animal or other offering. Worship or service of God is “logical” or right and proper. It is logical that a Christ-follower’s life mirrors the nature of God as seen in the Christ event. God engaged with humanity in its brokenness in order to bring life to a world enslaved to sin and death. It is logical to serve God by engaging in that same kind of life.

Being able to offer holy and rational worship to God is a matter of transformation. It involves not being conformed to this world. The word “conformed” is in the passive tense indicating that Paul recognizes an influencing power from the world still defined by the age of Adam. One way the Christian community might be influenced to follow the thinking of the old age of Adam is to believe God is exclusively theirs, as Jews had believed, which would lead them to exclude hardened Israel from their network. The way of escaping the influence of the old age so that the new age in Christ can be embraced is through God’s transformation, as indicated in the passive form of this word. This was seen in chapters 6-8 in the discussion of no longer being slaves to sin and being led by the Spirit of God. This does not totally negate the need for the person to open themselves up to being transformed by God’s Spirit, but it does indicate that the transformation itself is only possibly through God. Jews thought such transformation came through Torah (2:18), which Paul has debunked in the first half of the letter. Paul was speaking of an inward renewal that comes from God’s Spirit and is lived out in one’s life. This is another place where the already/not yet tension exists between currently living in the flesh in an environment still influenced by the age of Adam and a life being lived while looking toward the time when Christ returns and the reconciliation of God’s creation is completed.

This renewal of the mind is a change in attitudes and perspectives. The word translated “think” is used four times in a ten-word span. Christ-Followers are not to think more highly than they ought to think, but to think with sober thinking. The transformed mind understands that the faithfulness of God provided covenant relationships, understands the futility of living according to the old Age of Adam, and understands the new reality of the new age of Christ where there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, bond nor slave. All are one in Christ. This is not about a set of rules but a mind synchronized with will of God (the mind of Christ: 1 Cor. 2:16; Phil. 2:5) that is naturally lived out in each and every moment of life. What is good and acceptable and perfect is discerned, or proven through testing in the normal experiences of life. In the context of the one body in Christ, this renewal of the mind is not just individual decisions but corporate decisions as well.

In the context of Romans, this will of God includes God’s desire for hardened Israel to see His work among Gentiles so that jealousy would draw them to Messiah.

This is at least a part of the will of God the Christian community needed to understand. Paul believed Israel would come to understand his gospel did proclaim God's faithfulness to Abraham if Christ-followers demonstrated the steadfast love of God in their relationship with those Jews who had not yet accepted Messiah.

One Body In Christ: 12:3-8

As Paul spoke, it was with the authority of God. His apostolic activity was a result of the grace given to him. The previous discussion of a transformed mind that can discern the will of God addressed a perceived concern for the health of the faith community in Rome. In the sense that hardened Israel was the beneficiary of God's promise to Abraham, they were still described as God's beloved (11:28), and the Christian community very well may have stayed connected to the synagogue, it is possible to see hardened Israel as a part of that faith community, a part of the community God was continuing to work on in order that they might accept Jesus. Jews (Christ-following and Christ rejecting) had demonstrated pride in the way they interpreted the blessings God had given them and Gentiles had demonstrated pride in thinking God had chosen them over Israel. This new community of Jew and Gentile struggled with understanding and accepting what being God's new community meant in everyday life. It does not mean that hardened Israel has been permanently discarded. When it is recognized that all the blessings come from the grace and mercy of God, there is no ground for boasting in oneself, in one's relationship with God, or in one's belief in Messiah. There is only room for humility and sober judgment.

God has distributed a measure of faith to each. Not every one has the same measure of faith: some are hardened (temporarily) from coming to faith, some are weak with respect to faith, and some are strong in faith. God also distributes different gifts to each member. There is no place for boasting in the measure of one's faith, or in the gift one is given. Every spiritual blessing comes from the merciful grace of God. No spiritual blessing comes from anything within us. This should leave no jealousy toward those who may have more faith or a different gift. Rather it should only lead to praise of God.

God does not leave His people to fend for themselves in terms of community life and health. He works within them so that his people are gifted with the ability to perform different functions designed for the benefit of the whole. No gift is purely for the benefit of the individual. Everyone is given a gift and each gift is indispensable to the faith community. There is therefore, no place for a sense of superiority.

In chapters 14 and 15 there will be a discussion of those who are weak in faith and those who are strong in faith. It is likely the "measure of faith" here has to do with the weak/strong conversation in 14-15. Those who have the lesser measure of faith or weak faith are one of two groups. They are either Jewish Christ-followers who want to hold on to Jewish ritual or Jews who believe in God but have not yet come to trust that Jesus is God's fulfillment of His covenant promise. If Paul's concern here has to do with how Christ-followers relate to Jews who have not accepted Jesus, the greater measure of faith and the gifts are given for the purpose of showing God's work among Gentiles in order to make Israel jealous.

A Community Defined by Patient Love: 12:9-21

“And the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). At the heart of the life within a faith community is love. God’s steadfast love as stated in Exodus 34:6 and often repeated by Israel’s prophets is the character that most defines God’s actions toward His creation. Therefore, love is the characteristic that should most define God’s people. *Agape* (love) was not a word that was given any exceptional connotation in non-biblical literature at the time of this letter. The Christian community gave it a special meaning. Paul used it earlier to speak of the love of God (5:5, 8:8:39) and of Christ (8:35). “This is a word seized and taken over by the first Christians as they sought to find language to express their new experience of grace, a word filled with new content and significance by earliest Christian experience of God’s love. Paul took it for granted that human *agape* was possible only as an expression of divine *agape*.”¹ The following statements are elaborations on what it means to love. He begins with defining godly love as that which is without hypocrisy (genuine). Coming out of a discussion of spiritual gifts, this is not accidental. It is important that the possession of spiritual gifts be kept in check by attitude of love.

Paul used extremely strong words to draw a contrast in what one clings to or avoids after transitioning from the old age to the new age. “Hate” or “abhor” is in sharp contrast to “hold fast” (be glued to) just as evil is the exact opposite of good, which is what is consistent with the will of God (12:3). The word translated “love” in verse 10 is a word often used of family relations indicating the closeness that this new community is to have toward one another even though coming from diverse and even estranged backgrounds (Jew/Gentile). Seeking to lead the way in outdoing each other in showing honor is not to be given because of any quality inherent within the person but because they are beloved of God. Christ-followers are not to be slothful (not lag in zeal) in his/her desire to express love for one another but to allow the transforming work of God’s Spirit to flow from them like a pan of water boiling over. Not only does love naturally flow from the transforming work of the Spirit, it is a natural response of one who serves Christ (the Lord), the one who defined love in His death. When love is challenged or rejected, Christ-followers have confident trust (“hope”) in the faithfulness of God and therefore the ability to be patient when suffering knowing he/she is moving toward the completion of God’s purpose. Persistent communication with God (prayer) is a source of strength when attempts of love are rejected and when the tension of living in the already/not yet time is experienced while waiting for the return of Christ.

If Christ-followers were being instructed to love Jews who had not accepted Jesus, these are the ones who are the source for the suffering of the Christ-followers. Believing Jews and Gentiles who lived in close association with unbelieving Jews should have expected to be pursued and persecuted by at least some Jews who had to that point rejected Jesus, just as they had persecuted Paul. The more common understanding of this text is that the “saints” (NRSV) or “God’s people (NIV) in verse 13 refer only to believing Jews and Gentiles. But remember hardened Jews were called “holy” in 11:16 because of their connection to the first fruits of dough and the root. If this is the group Paul was referring to here, Christians were being instructed to contribute to

¹ Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988) pg. 739.

the needs of hardened Israel and to pursue hospitality toward them. “Hospitality” means, “love the stranger/person not of your in-group,” which would at least include unbelieving Israel if not directly referring to them.

Following the teaching of Jesus (Matt. 5:10-12, 43-48; Luke 6:28), Christ-followers are to bless (eulogize) those who persecute them. It may be interesting to note that the word translated “extend” (NRSV) or “practice” (NIV) in verse 13 is the same word in a different form translated “persecute” in verse 14. If the use of the same word to speak of both hospitality and persecution was intentional, Paul was instructing Christians to be just as diligent in pursuing hospitality toward their enemies (unbelieving Jews) as their enemies were in their persecution of Christians. Christ-followers were to overcome the conflict through hospitality and speech that blesses. They were to engage with them whether in their tears or in their joy. The phrase “one another” is most commonly seen as referring to Christians. But if Christians were still deeply engaged with the synagogue, unbelieving Jews were still part of their fellowship. In 11:13ff, Gentile Christians were warned against being arrogant about their relationship with God and being arrogant in thinking their wisdom led them to believe God had permanently rejected Israel. Such thoughts do not express the will of God.

When persecution or “evil” comes from Jews who had yet to accept Jesus, Believers were not to retaliate in kind. The noble response, the one that is discerning of the will of God is for Christians to make sure any strife that exists comes from the persecutor, not from the one who follows Christ. The phrase “heap burning coals on their heads” is almost an exact quote of Proverbs 25:21. Its meaning is disputed by scholars. It certainly would not fit the context to interpret it as meaning that genuine sacrificial acts of kindness are designed to have a negative effect on someone when the whole purpose is to maintain peace. This is very likely an idiom that expressed something positive that Paul and his contemporaries understood even though foreign to us. The Jewish Targum on Prov. 25:21 states, “... and God will hand him over to you” or “will make him your friend.”² It is more likely that this phrase expresses the belief that there can be a positive change of mind in one’s enemy by showing hospitality, speaking well of, and tending to their most basic needs.

If there is any wrathful or disciplinary response, it is to come from God, whose response will always do what is right. To respond with revenge destroys the good that love for one’s enemies is intended to accomplish.

Conclusion

Unless there is an obvious reason not to, the interpretation of texts within a letter needs to be connected to the overall context. This is the reason this document is taking the approach of connecting chapter 12-15 to what has been said previously, especially the context of chapters 9-11. It is admittedly easier to detach chapters 12-15 from the previous context of Romans, but just because it is easier does not make it the correct approach. There are admitted difficulties fitting some statements in the context of relationship with hardened Israel, but there are also difficulties with detaching these chapters from the previous chapters in Romans.

² Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1988) pg. 751.

Even hardened Israel was described as consecrated to God due to their relationship with the dough or root (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob). God's hardening of Israel was to be only until the fullness of Gentiles comes in (11:25). As Gentiles, after their time of disobedience, were recipients of God's mercy, Israel, after its time of disobedience will be shown mercy. If this is God's will and the Christian community is to live within the will of God it must include a relationship with hardened Israel that reaches out to them in love. This is a part of how the Christian community is to live out their calling by offering their daily lives as a sacrifice to God.

This expression of love must be genuine. The Christian community must be understanding of those (including hardened Israel) who do not have the same measure of faith and use their measure of faith and gifts of God for the good of the body, including hardened Israel. It would be very easy to repay persecution from hardened Israel in kind, but that is not the message of the cross. Christians are called to sacrificial love that prays for and helps their enemies. Remember, although hardened Israel is an enemy in terms of their rejection of the gospel, they are beloved for the sake of their ancestors (11:28). Let God take care of any disciplinary action that He may deem necessary and live out your call of peace with all people (including non-believing Israel), as far as it depends on you.

This approach does not negate the call of Christians to live this same kind of sacrificial life with all people. It was only because of Christ's sacrificial love even when we were enemies (Rom. 5:10) that we have covenant relationship with God. How can we withhold that same love from our enemies?

