



MAIN COMMENTARIES ON 'ROMANS'

Chapter 12

As in other epistles - such as his Epistle to the Colossians - St. Paul begins Romans with a doctrinal examination (in this instance, examining the issue of salvation and righteousness), and then concludes with practical advice for daily living or for the functioning of the local church. In Romans 6:11 he tells you to reckon yourself dead to sin: Romans chapter twelve (as well as part of chapter thirteen) examines the effects that reckoning yourself dead to sin should have on your life.

St. Paul begins by encouraging Christians to offer our entire lives to the worship and service of God (Romans 12:1). He states that we do this "by the mercies of God." This means that we offer everything about us to God as a response to all the merciful things He has done (which St. Paul has discussed throughout the first eleven chapters of the Epistle).

In response to God's mercy, we offer our bodies a "living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God" (12:1). In contrast to the animal sacrifices of many ancient religions (which were one-time events, since the animal was killed and the carcass destroyed or eaten), the Christian sacrifice is living, a continual offering of our lives to God. Such a living sacrifice of ourselves is *holy*, meaning that our lives are now set apart from the concerns of the world and instead consecrated to the service of God. Only this sacrificial life is acceptable to God.

The fourth century Christian Ambrosiaster explains this verse:

Paul pleads with them through the mercy of God, by which the human race is saved...This is a warning that they should remember that they have received God's mercy and that they should take care to worship the one Who gave it to them. God's will is our sanctification, for bodies subject to sin are considered not to be alive but dead, since they have no hope of obtaining the promise of eternal life. It is for this purpose that we are cleansed from our sins by God's gift, that henceforth we should lead a pure life and stir up the love of God in us, not making His work of grace of no effect. For the ancients killed sacrifices which were offered in order to signify that men were subjected to death because of sin. But now, since by the gift of God men have been purified and set free from the second death, they must offer a living sacrifice as a sign of eternal life. For now it is no longer the case that bodies are sacrificed for bodies, but instead of bodies it is the sins of the body which must be put to death.

This type of sacrificial life, St. Paul teaches, is our "reasonable service" (other translations render this phrase "spiritual worship," or as Fr. Lawrence Farley translates it, "rational worship") (Romans 12:1). St. Paul is saying that our worship must be intentional and conscious; in other words, we should think about, and believe in, what we are doing. St. Paul criticizes some first century Jews for having "a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (10:2); they devotedly served God and followed the Law, but they did not understand what they were doing or why they were doing it, because if they had this knowledge they would have recognized Jesus as their Messiah and worshipped Him. Christians are not supposed to

simply “go through the motions” in following the spiritual practices of the Church, or to miss the point of these practices: we should always be aware that we fast, pray, attend the Liturgy, etc., in whole-hearted gratitude to God and to grow into a deeper union with Him. Any other reason - such as fasting because it makes you feel superior to Christians who do not fast - would be unreasonable or irrational service of God.

This understanding of “reasonable service” leads directly into verse two, where St. Paul exhorts us, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). You should not allow yourself to be shaped by the corrupted values of modern society (described so vividly by St. Paul in Romans 1:18-32), but instead should be completely transformed by your relationship with God.

The “mind” - your inner person - must be transformed by your relationship with God. In Romans 7:23, St. Paul laments that within him is a continual war between the law of the mind and the law of his physical members; it is only possible to win this war when your mind is renewed through your relationship with God. Fr. Lawrence Farley explains:

We must not let our minds and mental habits become corrupt, growing old and degenerate like the world. Instead, we must let our minds be renewed, growing fresh and brand new, by dwelling on what God wills (see Ephesians 4:22, 23). Then we will prove what is the will of God, discerning it and doing it...If we will allow our minds to be renewed by God, then we can know and recognize what is truly good and well-pleasing to Him and perfect, reaching the goal of pleasing the Lord.

St. Gregory of Nyssa writes in the fourth century that we are transformed through our relationship with the Holy Spirit, “The perfect will of God is the soul be changed by reverence, having been brought to the full flower of its beauty by the grace of the Spirit, which attends to the sufferings of the person who undergoes the change.”

The Holy Spirit does not transform you in isolation - contrary to what some Christians believe, the spiritual life does not consist entirely of “Jesus and me.” While your personal relationship with God *is* important - no one can have a relationship with God *for* you - you are not alone as a Christian: you are a member of Christ’s Church. Romans 12:3-8 provides valuable guidance for living in unity with other members of the Church.

St. Paul warns against pride, telling his readers that no one should “think of himself more highly than he ought to think” (Romans 12:3). Lorenzo Scupoli, a sixteenth century Christian, teaches,

Since the time of the transgression of our forefather, despite the weakening of our spiritual and moral powers, we are wont to think very highly of ourselves. Although our daily experience very effectively proves to us the falseness of this opinion of ourselves, in our incomprehensible self-deception we do not cease to believe that we are something, and something not unimportant. Yet this spiritual disease of ours, so hard to perceive and acknowledge, is more abhorrent to God than all else in us, as being the first offspring of our self-hood and self-love, and the source, root and cause of all passions and of all our downfalls and wrong-doing. It closes the very door of our mind or spirit, through which alone Divine grace can enter, and gives this grace no way to come and dwell in a man.

We should not be prideful because we are all members of the one Body of Christ, and no single member of a body is more important than another (see 1 Corinthians 12:12). At the same time, however, each member of your body has a different function: your feet are used for standing and walking, your hands are used for grasping and manipulating objects, etc. In the same way, each of us are members of the one Body of Christ, but each has individually been given specific and different gifts (referring to special abilities) by God to benefit the Body (Romans 12:4-6).

St. Paul says that these gifts are given to us according to “faith” and “grace” (Romans 12:3, 6). These references to faith and grace are not referring to the faith and grace by which we are saved, but instead refer to the individual capacity of each person to receive and use the gift from God. St. Basil the Great explains in the fourth century, “No one has the capacity to receive all spiritual gifts, but the grace of the Spirit is given proportionately to the faith of each one.” St. John Chrysostom further clarifies this point, “Paul says not that one person received more and another less of God’s gifts but only that they are different. We all have different functions, but the body is one and same.”

Because you can learn more about the spiritual gifts listed in verses 6-8 in the article, “Do I Use My Gifts,” we will not go into detail looking at this list. There are nonetheless two important things to note at this point. First, God does not give you - or anyone else in the Church - any of these gifts solely for his or her own personal profit or self-fulfillment: the gifts are given to help the body of Christ. Furthermore, the fact that God distributes the gifts throughout the Church shows that you are not self-reliant, as Ambrosiaster teaches, “Paul teaches that it is impossible for any one of us to do everything on our own, for we are members of each other and need one another. For this reason we ought to behave toward one another with care, because we need each other’s gifts.”

A second thing to note is that we should be generous when sharing our gifts with others, and thankful for the opportunity to do this service (Romans 12:8). You should be glad that you can assist others, and not, as Ambrosiaster says, behave “as if somebody was twisting (your) arm to do it.”

Why should your attitude matter? Why would God care if you are doing a good thing because you want to do it, or if you’re doing a good thing because you feel forced to do it? Your attitude is important, St. Paul says, because you should “let love be without hypocrisy” (Romans 12:9). Hypocrisy is so serious that St. John Climacus, a sixth century monk, writes, “Hypocrisy is the mother of lying, and often its occasion. For some define hypocrisy as none other than meditation on falsehood, and an inventor of falsehood which has a reprehensible oath intertwined with it.” Rather than give in to such evil, you should cling to what is good (12:9).

Instead of hypocritical service to the Church, St. Paul encourages demonstrating love and affection to others (Romans 12:10). The New King James Version (used by the Orthodox Study Bible) unfortunately makes it difficult to understand the attitude about which St. Paul is talking. The NKJV says, “In honor giving preference to one another;” Fr. Lawrence Farley gives a clearer translation, “Go before one another in showing honor.” We should never be satisfied with minimal effort; instead, we should continually strive to do even more for others. St. Paul is not telling you to compete in doing good - the point is not to defeat other people or appear more generous than them. He is warning against being complacent: for example, do not say to yourself, “There’s no need for me to help in this ministry,

because that person is already addressing the problem.” Instead, you should say, “That person is working in this ministry; if I assist her, we can do even more for people!” If you have this attitude, you will be diligently, fervently serving the Lord (Romans 12:11).

St. Paul foresaw the persecution that would befall the Church. He therefore tells Christians to not fail to serve others when problems come, but instead to joyfully and patiently continue to retain your hope in God (Romans 12:12). Instead of giving in to despair and rejecting God and the Church, Christians are called to remain steadfast in prayer and continue doing what you can to serve others regardless of the circumstances (12:12-13). The importance of this faithfulness can be seen in verse fourteen: even when you are persecuted you should be so filled with love for others that you extend love to those who persecute you.

This kind of love is only possible if you experience empathy for others, truly identifying with their feelings and experiences (Romans 12:15). We should be joyful when they are joyful - which prevents experiencing envy and jealousy - and commiserate with them when they are suffering. Elder Joseph the Hesychast, a twentieth century monk on Mt. Athos, explains the importance of empathizing with the suffering of others, “When can someone understand human suffering? When he also suffers. When he goes through the same, he learns and understands the other person's suffering. Otherwise, he is callous and is not grieved, unless he happens to have a good nature.”

This patient, empathetic love is only possible if you are truly humble (Romans 12:16). You should not separate yourself from others because you think you are too good to lower yourself to their level. Instead, as Fr. Lawrence Farley teaches, “One should not think of oneself as too good for such poor people, fearing to dirty one's hands by being among them and sharing their lot. On the contrary, one should willingly and enthusiastically join in with them.”

St. Paul concludes Romans chapter twelve with a warning against wrath and vengeance (12:17-21). As much as it is possible, the Apostle implores, “have regard for good things in the sight of all men” and “live peaceably with all men” (12:17, 18). A key element of this is refusing to seek revenge when someone has harmed you (12:19-20).

One of the attributes of God is that He is “slow to anger;” St. James therefore exhorts us to be “slow to wrath, for the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God” (James 1:19-20). St. Paul teaches that one of the characteristics of love is that it is not “easily angered” (1 Corinthians 13:5).

One of the most common reactions to provocations is the desire for revenge; we wish to make the provocateur suffer in the same way that we have suffered. Our Lord clearly condemns such an attitude:

You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. (Matthew 5:38-41)

St. John Chrysostom notes that Christ requires “entire self-restraint, commanding him that suffers ill not merely to be quiet, but even to be more exceedingly earnest in his turn, by offering the other cheek.”

Abba John the Dwarf summarizes, “When you are despised do not get angry; be at peace, and do not render evil for evil.”

St. Macarius the Great provides an excellent example of responding to provocations with longsuffering: “If one of the brethren said to him, as though to humiliate him, ‘Abba, when you were a camel-driver, and stole nitre and sold it again, did not the keepers beat you?’ If someone talked to him like that he would talk to them with joy about whatever they asked him.”

Being patient with provocateurs is beneficial for both the provocateur and the victim. St. John Chrysostom comments on 1 Thessalonians 5:14: “‘Be longsuffering toward all,’ he says. Even toward the disorderly? Yes, certainly. For there is no medicine equal to this, especially for the teacher, none so suitable to those who are under rule. It can quite shame and put out of countenance him that is fiercer and more shameless than all men.”

A longsuffering response to provocation does not mean that Christians must be milquetoasts; we are not called to allow ourselves to be endlessly and pointlessly abused. For example, Christ explains the procedure for confronting Christians who wrong other Christians, beginning with personal exhortation and concluding with expulsion from the Church (Matthew 18:15-17). We should nonetheless always remember Solomon’s proverb, “Wise men turn away wrath” (Proverbs 29:8).

The best way of turning away wrath, St. Paul teaches, is to “overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). He quotes Proverbs 25:21, 22 to demonstrate how this can be done: feed your enemy when he is hungry, and give him something to drink when he is thirsty (12:20). This response to malice, Scripture says, will “heap coals of fire on (your enemy’s) head” (12:20). Blessed Jerome explains this passage, “If someone does you a wrong and in return you do him good you will be heaping coals of fire on his head. In other words, you are curing him of his vices and burning out his malice, in order to bring him to repentance.”