

Romans Part 43 – Chapter 12

Sunday, March 5, 2023

With input from BibleRef.com, reddit.com/r/GetMotivated,

Last week we ended with the thought from **Romans 12:10**:

“Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor.”

We are to take on our biblical responsibilities as children of God, set aside our rights, and obey God. This becomes more obvious in the verses that follow verse 10.

Romans 12:11-21:

11 *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.*

Now Paul writes that we must not be lazy in our enthusiasm. The two commands may well be related. Paul is urging us to be energetic in our attempts to give honor to each other. It may be that he is urging us to live with zeal or enthusiasm, in general, to remain focused, intentional, and positive about our purpose in treating each other well in the body of Christ.

He ramps the idea of enthusiasm up another notch by adding that we must be fervent in spirit; we must keep our spiritual fervor. The Greek word here is *zeontes*, related to the root word for "life," and the phrase could literally be translated that we must be boiling in our spirit. This could either mean that we must keep up our own spirits or that we should be set on fire by God's Spirit in us. In either case, this is a clear call from Paul to avoid allowing ourselves to become bored or tepid as we pursue our purpose as believers.

There is an appropriate target for this energy and enthusiasm: serving the Lord. That's the final command in the verse. Connecting that together, Paul is urging us to be "all in," both spiritually and emotionally, when it comes to serving the Lord and serving each other.

Remember that Paul told Timothy (2 Timothy 4:2) *preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.*

12 *Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*

The three commands in this verse are key to the emotional and spiritual well-being of every Christian.

The first command to Christians is to rejoice in hope. Often, we resist instruction about what we should feel: that we should change our attitudes to be joyful. The idea here, though, is more about declaring ourselves as having reason for joy. It's not a command to be happy, but to have the right perspective on our situation.

We should agree with God that our hope is worth rejoicing over. What hope? Paul is referring to the hope of the redemption of our bodies and being united with our Father forever once our adoption is complete (Romans 8:23–24).

The next command is to be patient in tribulation or affliction. This becomes much easier if we are keeping the other two commands. Those who see their future worth celebrating and who pray to the Father continually will have a much easier time being patient during hardship. Paul is not downplaying the genuine pain of those experiences.

Life can be unpleasant, and not all moments are happy moments. Yet Paul has pointed out that the struggles of life on earth are not worth comparing with the glory to come (Romans 8:18). So, we wait with patience (Romans 8:25).

The final command of the verse also connects with Paul's thoughts in Romans chapter 8. We're commanded to be constant in prayer, or to keep praying continually. During any time of suffering, while waiting for what we're hoping in, we should pray. Prayer brings a connection with our Father through the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:26–27). He hears, understands, and helps in response to even our clumsiest attempts to communicate with Him.

13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Paul writes that we must contribute to the needs of other believers. The practice of the church in its earliest days was for wealthier Christians to sell their belongings to meet the physical needs of Christians who were not as well off. Not only did these acts of sacrificial giving demonstrate sincere service to God, they demonstrated to other believers and the watching world that these Christians practiced what they talked about.

In the same way, we are commanded to show hospitality to each other. The world can be a cold, lonely, and dangerous place. One hallmark of the Christian community is that it is meant to offer safe and welcoming spaces to believers through the hospitality of other believers. Traveling from town to town in Paul's day was always a risk. Christians welcomed by other genuine believers as they passed through or arrived in a new town were protected from thieves, weather, and violence. We're called to provide the same service to each other, in the contexts of our own individual cultures.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Now Paul begins a new set of commands detailing what life in Christ on this side of eternity is supposed to look like. Taken together, it paints a picture of the Christian life. Followers of Jesus should be seen as those who love and take care of each other, in powerful and self-sacrificing ways.

This new command, however, can also be applied to how Christians interact with unbelievers. Paul echoes the direct teaching of Jesus: *Bless those who persecute you and don't curse them* (Matthew 5:44). It's possible that Paul is referring to persecution for the sake of Christ, but the same principle applies to any situation where we are treated badly.

The normal human instinct, of course, is to do the opposite. We feel the natural desire to curse those who hurt us and to avoid doing good for them at all costs. Christians who follow Paul's teaching here, instead, will stand out in almost every culture. They will also be imitating both Jesus' words and His example, as He carried this principle even to the extent of praying for the well-being of His enemies (Luke 23:34).

While it's true that this makes a powerful statement to unbelievers, Christians can also practice this with each other. Sometimes other Christians don't follow Paul's teachings. We can become hurtful to each other in big and small ways. Nothing communicates sincere love back to a brother or sister who is being hurtful than doing good for them and refusing to strike back at them.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.

Christians should be masters of empathy, according to Paul. He commands those who are in Christ to be submissive to each other even in our emotions. Nothing communicates sincere love and concern for another person more powerfully than recognizing and joining in their highs and lows. We show love by empathizing with their seasons of celebration and allowing ourselves to feel broken with them in their seasons of heartache.

Jesus Himself powerfully modeled this in John 11:33–35. He was deeply moved and wept with Mary and the others after Lazarus had died. Jesus knew He would raise Lazarus from dead, but that did not keep Him from joining in the sadness of those experiencing the loss.

Saved believers have been shown great grace by God (Romans 3:23–24), who experienced our temptations and suffering (Hebrews 4:15–16). Just as Christians, who have been shown great mercy, ought to be merciful to others (Romans 11:30–31; Ephesians 4:32), so too should they reflect God's empathy through compassion for others.

16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Paul is not instructing Christians to all be exactly alike in every behavior and opinion. In chapter 14, he will discuss the fact that Christians will inevitably have matters of differing opinions. Rather, he is commanding believers to adjust to each other in a way that produces pleasantness and order. This requires a level of mutual submission: a willingness to make different choices that will allow us all to get along together.

To live in harmony requires humility from everyone involved. It's not surprising, then, that Paul's next instruction is that we not be haughty or arrogant and stuck up. He makes clear what he means with a follow-up command: associate with the lowly. In other words, don't think of yourselves as being too good to hang out socially with anyone else at all.

One of the reasons Christianity attracted so many followers in its early days was that women and slaves and people of low social standing were all welcome to come to faith in Christ. The result was that people who would never associate anywhere else in Roman culture found themselves in relationship with each other in the church. Paul commands those on the upper levels of society to leave any class rivalry out of the church.

His final command in this verse is that Christians must never be wise in our own sight. This is not the same as saying that we are never wise. The idea is that we should not accept our own opinion as the final word. We submit to the word of God, as well as to the input and ideas of others.

17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

Paul declares that we must resist our natural human instinct for revenge and refuse to ever pay back evil when evil is done to us. This would be true whether the person who hurts us is a believer or not.

Instead, Paul tells us to be thoughtful when evil is done to us. He seems to suggest we see that moment as an opportunity to demonstrate that, in Christ, we are honorable people. We cannot, after all, display the love and forgiveness of Christ until we have the opportunity to forgive. When we do, we make a powerful statement that we are choosing to live in service to God instead of to ourselves.

The following verses will expand on this idea, including the claim that doing good for one's enemies is a far more powerful response than attempting petty revenge.

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

As believers, we should live peaceably with all people. This would include our siblings in Christ, as well as unbelievers. Another way to read this command might be, "Never let yourself be the reason for an un-peaceful relationship with another person."

This is not a statement of total pacifism or complete apathy, however. Paul gives two clear conditions: "If possible" and "so far as it depends on you." This command recognizes that conflict is sometimes unavoidable. Some people are just not interested in making peace with us. There is such a thing as an appropriate time and place to disagree, to dispute, or even to fight. Not every action that makes others happy is something good, or something God would want us to do.

What does it require to live this way? For one, of course, we must be willing to admit our wrongs, to apologize, to make things right, and to forgive. This is where the idea of "so far as it depends on you" comes into play. Our own ego, pride, desires, and prejudices should never get in the way of living peaceably with others. First and foremost, that means we ought not do "wrong" things to or towards other people.

Not all conflict is related to wrongdoing, however. Sometimes, it's simply a question of two sides who disagree about an issue with no absolute answer. In those cases, maintaining the peace may require us to be willing to yield, to be moved, on an issue we care about.

The Bible is clear, however, that on matters of bedrock conviction, we must take our stand with grace, mercy, and integrity (Hebrews 10:23). When making "peace" is possible only by compromising the truth, or the commands of God (Acts 5:28–29), then peace is simply not possible, and the choice no longer depends on us. That stance might result in our own suffering or persecution. Paul has shown that it always matters more that we represent Christ well than to come away with an outcome we find favorable (Philippians 4:11–13).

19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Those who follow Christ are commanded to never avenge themselves, to never "get even." Whether the hurt comes from fellow believers or from unbelievers, revenge is simply not a legitimate option for us.

For a change, Paul gives us a reason for this command, and it's a bit surprising. After all the other instructions to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others, we might expect something similar. Instead, Paul writes that we should refuse to take revenge because God is much better at it than we are. In a sense, Paul implies that taking our own revenge may dilute God's opportunity to avenge us in His great anger against those who harm us.

Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35 to show that God has always declared His intention to take vengeance on those who wrong others. A desire for justice for ourselves and those we care about is not wrong. Paul simply wants us to trust God's timing and power to deliver justice as He sees fit.

How do we respond to this idea? On the one hand, we might be concerned that God will show mercy to those who harm us instead of giving them what they deserve. After all, He has shown great mercy to us. Isn't that what God does? The truth is that God executes justice for every sin, including ours. For those in Christ, God's anger was poured out on Jesus on the cross. Someone suffered for those sins: Christ. He experienced what we deserved. Those who refuse to receive Jesus' death in their place for their sin will suffer the consequences for that sin themselves for eternity.

With that punishment in mind, perhaps we will hesitate to wish for God's vengeance on our persecutors. Perhaps not. In either case, God says to us, "Trust me to handle revenge and justice for all who harm you instead of seeking it yourself."

20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."

One reasonable way to interpret Paul's command would be as an instruction to avoid and ignore those who harm us. If we can't get even, at least we can stay away from them. However, Paul now reveals that this is not the path of those who follow Christ. Instead, we are called to active, positive, and generous engagement with those who harm us. Rather than simply ignoring our enemies, we ought to seek to do good for them and to them.

This is not meant to be taken as a command to stay in a situation in which someone is actively physically harming us. Retreating from violence or avoiding a physical abuser is not being discouraged here, at all. If we can take steps to avoid future injury, that is the right and wise thing to do. God is not commanding us to welcome any kind of abuse.

Even though we're not being commanded to "embrace" abuse, this is still a hard teaching. In quoting Solomon's words from Proverbs 25:21–22, Paul's description of how to respond to evildoers is galling, even infuriating, at first. At the same time, there is a certain ruthlessness about it, spiritually speaking. We are called to bring down fiery conviction on our enemies by being relentlessly kind in seeing and meeting their basic needs. As we do, two things happen. One, we reflect God's own mercy to us who were once His enemies (Romans 5:10). Second, we show both that we do not deserve to be treated poorly and that we are stronger than those who harm us.

The description of "heaping burning coals" is a reference to Proverbs 25:21–22. In Egypt, there had been a custom to carry a pan of burning coals on one's head as a sign of repentance. Kindness and forgiveness to those who abuse us, ideally, will make them ashamed of themselves, and hopefully bring them to repent. The strongest, most powerful response to persecution and hatred is to love your enemies.

Those who choose to do good to their enemies create the opportunity Paul describes in the following verse.

21 *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Now Paul comes to the final command of the chapter. In essence, he commands us to be strong in our conviction to live in this way. We are not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. Paul seems to have in mind the idea that we are overcome by evil when we join in and give it back, when we sink to evil's level. That just results in more sin, more pain, and an endless cycle of revenge and hatred.



**"DARKNESS CANNOT
DRIVE OUT DARKNESS;
ONLY LIGHT CAN DO
THAT. HATE CANNOT
DRIVE OUT HATE; ONLY
LOVE CAN DO THAT."**

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.