

Christianity in Practice: Part 1

In the last lesson, we examined Paul's instructions to the Romans for them to make their bodies "living sacrifices." As a part of that instruction, Paul said that they were to "prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." Paul did not leave these brethren wondering what he meant. He did not leave them to make the discovery of what was "good and acceptable" to God without divine, inspired guidance. The rest of chapter 12, as well as most of Paul's writings through the middle of chapter 15 are focused on showing us how a Christian was supposed to behave himself. The principles he lays out in these chapters speak directly to what is "good and acceptable" to God. They encapsulate the characteristics that God expects His children to develop in themselves, and practice among others.

Humility...

We have spent quite a bit of time looking at the need for humility, and we saw just how much the scriptures speak of this need for humility. Paul, in Romans 12:3 returns us to this same idea. Humility is at the heart of all service before God. We cannot possibly be the kind of people that He wants if we are unwilling to humble ourselves before Him, and before others.

Paul wrote that one is "not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..." There is no reason for anyone to be puffed up in his thinking about himself. He is, after all, no better than anyone else. All in the church are servants of the Lord! So instead of thinking highly of himself, Paul says that one is to "think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." The English standard translates this phrase as: "... think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." This idea is to be directly related back to verse 2, where Paul made it clear that we had to have a renewal of the mind so that we no longer thought like those who were conformed to the world. This renewal of the mind causes us to think "soberly" or "with sober judgment."

Thinking soberly here means:

1 to be of sound mind. 1A to be in one's right mind. 1B to exercise self control. 1B1 to put a moderate estimate upon one's self; think of one's self soberly. 1B2 to curb one's passions.¹

This is the direct result of the transforming of your mind! It also stands as the direct contrast of thinking highly of oneself. Failing to think in this sober manner will lead to one ignoring the rest of what Paul wrote about how one is to act. As we have seen previously, how we think is reflected in how we behave ourselves.

Paul said that "...God has dealt to each one a measure of faith." Like many passages in Romans, this verse has been removed from its context to make an argument that Paul never intended, and never made. Paul was not telling the Romans that God had selected the kind of faith they would have and they had no ability to resist His gift. Instead, it should be understood that Paul was telling these brethren that God had given them an instrument of measurement to measure how their thinking

¹ Strong, James. *Enhanced Strong's Lexicon 1995* : n. pag. Print.

had changed, and to determine if they were thinking soberly: Faith. The translation of the English Standard here makes this point more evident: "...each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned." Faith is the measuring device that God has assigned to each one so that he might "prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God."

As Paul continued he made it clear why each person should not think more highly of himself than he ought to think. The natural inclination of man seems to be to think he is better than those around him. Paul made the point here that he is not better, just different. As in other passages, Paul used the example of one body having many members. It is not that one member of the body is somehow better than all the rest, but rather they are all serving different purposes. How do you determine that a hand is "better" than a foot? They cannot be compared in that way, as they serve different, though equally valuable purposes. In the same way, members in the body of Christ relate in the same manner. We are all one body, but different members, serving different purposes. One is not "better" than another...only different.

These different purposes (or gifts as Paul calls them in verse 6) are to be used in conjunction with one another to accomplish the complete purpose of the body as a whole. Paul includes in these instructions both spiritual (miraculous) gifts and natural gifts. We might think of these as talents to be used in the work of the kingdom. Whatever we have been blessed with, God expects us to use them to His glory. One could easily see how those with miraculous gifts might begin to think of themselves more highly than those who did not receive such gifts. It is, therefore, interesting to see that Paul includes these gifts right amongst those that are not miraculous. Even something so great as the gift of prophecy would not raise a person's standing above that of his brethren!

How these gifts were used would be a result of measuring them through the instrument of faith that God had given. When a person had the ability to do something in the service of God, how did they approach it? Halfheartedly? What was the motivation? Pride, or selfishness? No, Paul was emphasizing the need to use these gifts to the best of our abilities! He wants us to use the gifts that we have!

Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness (Romans 12:6-8).

Whether one had a miraculous gift or a natural gift, he was to use it to the best of his abilities, and to bring glory to God. He was not to do these things to draw attention to himself, or to be puffed up in himself. He was to put his all into his service to God and others! This principle is one that has been a part of God's will for a long time!

Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

While the spiritual gifts of Paul's day have passed on, the need to work together with our natural abilities within the body of the church is still vitally important. Notice some of the things that Paul mentions, remembering this is not an extensive list. He wrote of ministry, of teaching, of exhortation, of giving, of leadership and of mercy. Each of these should be fulfilled while measuring the manner and attitude through the measuring stick of faith. Are we living up to the criteria set out in God's word for implementing these areas of service? Can we hold up that ruler to our practices and see if they measure up to what is "that good and acceptable and perfect will of God"? For that to be the case, we must take the attention off of ourselves, and put it onto God. We don't think highly of ourselves because we can do these things, we praise God that we can work together to accom-

plish His will for us in His body. Our goal should be to use the talents that God has provided to us to glorify Him. If there is one underlying point through this section of Romans, it is that what we do as Christians is not about us. It is about God, and it is about others. We must humble ourselves, and become the kind of servants that God desires!

Behave like Christians...

After making it clear that Christians are supposed to serve, giving their all to the endeavor, Paul wrote with a little more specificity. He provided some examples of what this service looks like. We should keep in mind that what Paul writes over the next few verses points directly back to his opening admonition: “present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God...” (vs. 1).

Love without hypocrisy. After providing examples of specific works that could be performed by members of the “one body” down through verse 8, Paul turned his attention to the whole group. There are no limitations on the characteristics that he would enumerate over the next few verses; everyone could and should do them! He started this list by addressing the love that brethren are supposed to have for one another. He said that we should “Love without hypocrisy.” The idea refers back to the Greek thespians who would wear a mask as they performed, taking on the role of someone different from themselves. They acted in a way that was not true. Paul’s admonition is that we must love honestly. We are not pretending with the relationships that we forge in the church. We learn to love sincerely!

Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Paul speaks to the Christian’s attitude toward all evil in this phrase. He used the strong word abhor to relate just how drastically one is to reject evil. The word means:

88.203 ἀποστυγέω: to have a strong dislike for someone or something, implying repulsion and desire for avoidance—‘to hate, to despise.’ ἀποστυγοῦντες τὸ πονηρόν, κολλώμενοι τῷ ἀγαθῷ ‘hate what is evil; hold on to what is good’ Ro 12:9.²

Abhorring evil means we are repulsed by the idea of it, and that we will do all that is within our power to avoid it. We won’t be trying to get just as close as we can to sin, but rather will seek to stay as far from the line as we can. We are pushed away from it (repulsed). By contrast, Paul said that we are to “Cling to what is good.” Instead of being pushed away, we are drawn into the good. We are attracted to it in such a way as that we want to hold on tight to it. This imagery is much like that of magnets. When the poles of magnets are the same, they repulse (push away from) one another. But when the magnetism is reversed, they are strongly attracted to one another. The Christian should be like a pair of magnets that are of the same polarity when around evil: he should be utterly repulsed by it. And he should be strongly attracted to that which is good, just like a pair of magnets with opposite polarities.

Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love... In this phrase, Paul emphasized the familial relationship that is supposed to exist in the local body. The word that Paul chose, which is translated as “kindly affectionate to one another is an interesting one:

25.41 φιλόστοργος, ον: pertaining to love or affection for those closely related to one, particularly members of one’s immediate family or in-group—‘very loving, warmly devoted to, very affectionate.’ τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι ‘love one another affectionately as fellow believers’ Ro 12:10.³

2 Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 763. Print.

3 Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 292. Print.

In other Greek writings, this word referenced the love that was shared between parents and children, or husbands and wives. It reflected a love between close family relations. Paul used it here to identify the love that should exist between close spiritual family members. The New Testament uses familial terms to identify these close relations: brother, sister, father, son, etc. Paul's writings show that not only is this type of love to be present, but it is to be shown! And it is to be reciprocated! His instructions make it clear that Christians are supposed to have and show this affection for one another. Like with everything else that Paul will express, if this is lacking then our image as a Christian is also lacking! So how was one to show this kindly affection to others?

...In honor giving preference to one another. Here, the English Standard has a good translation: "Outdo one another in showing honor." Paul here shows how one can show "kindly affection with brotherly love" to another. He does it by showing greater honor to others. This returns us once again to the idea established earlier: humility. One cannot show greater honor to others if he is unwilling to humble himself before others. This idea is very similar to what Paul expressed to the Philippian brethren:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4).

Christians look out for the wellbeing of others before their own wellbeing! The ESV translation of Romans 12:10 emphasizes this mindset. Every Christian should work to outdo his brother in showing honor! If every member is striving to do better in honoring others, most discord in the local body will disappear. If each strives to make sure he is putting others above himself, then arguments, backbiting, and all ill will dissipate. Imagine what the local body looks like when every member is diligent about putting others first, showing respect and honor to the other brother!

Not lagging in diligence... The word for lagging could also be translated as *slothful* (as in the ESV). Paul warns that the Christian is not to be lazy, or idle when it comes to his diligence or zeal (ESV). As we see these responsibilities spelled out for us, we must have the right attitude in the way we approach each action. This is to become our way of life, not something we fit in if we have the time. We approach every responsibility laid upon us with diligence.

Notice that Paul started this phrase with a negative: not lagging in diligence. He then presented the opposite for a contrast: fervent in spirit. Rather than being lazy or idle, we are to serve the Lord by being fervent in spirit. This word conveys the idea of being "on fire" for the Lord and His work:

*25.73 ζέω τῷ πνεύματι: (an idiom, literally 'to boil in the spirit') to show great eagerness toward something— 'to show enthusiasm, to commit oneself completely to.' ζέων τῷ πνεύματι ἐλάλει καὶ ἐδίδασκεν ἀκριβῶς τὰ περὶ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ 'with great enthusiasm he spoke and taught correctly the facts about Jesus' Ac 18:25. In some languages it may be difficult to find an appropriate equivalent of the phrase 'with great enthusiasm,' but in some instances an equivalent expression may be 'he showed how much he liked to do' or 'he showed how he did so with all his heart.'*⁴

This attitude will have a direct impact on our actions. God wants us to be completely devoted to Him, and to be zealous in our work for Him:

looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works (Titus 2:13-14).

⁴ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains 1996* : 296-297. Print.

Paul completes this verse by saying that the Christian is not to be lacking in diligence, but fervent in spirit in the process of serving the Lord. The idea here is that of a slave. This service that is required is complete, and total servitude before the Lord. It is not “part time” or “when I feel like it” or “when I like it”. It is the same concept as Paul established in chapter 6; we are slaves of righteousness! Serving God, doing His will becomes our very existence.

Rejoicing in hope... L.A. Mott, Jr., in his book *Thinking Through Romans*⁵, points out that there are 9 datives of respect addressed by Paul in this section. Reading these phrases in such a way can be beneficial. Here, for example, the natural reading would be, “with respect to hope, rejoicing.” The idea is that we should, when considering the hope that is set before us, rejoice! The hope that God has given to us in eternal life is a goal ever in front of us, something to strive for, something for us to attain to.

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1)

Thus God, determining to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel, confirmed it by an oath, that by two immutable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which enters the Presence behind the veil, where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus, having become High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (Hebrews 6:17–20).

Perhaps Paul’s most extensive address of this hope is found in Romans 8:18-30. There, Paul described the nature of the hope that we have as Christians, that which we are looking forward to. The hope that God has set before us is what helps us to overcome the tribulations that we must face in this life. We are going to have to face difficulties in life if we choose to be Christians. God has never promised that following Him would lead to an easy life. We can remain faithful, and overcome the trials we face, because we have a hope of something greater that is to come. This idea is emphasized by Paul:

For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance (Romans 8:24–25).

Paul made it clear that this is not some blind hope. It is not something that we look forward to, without having evidence to support its coming. In fact, Paul wrote that God has given us the Holy Spirit to help us in the wait for adoption that is to come.

Paul, in our context, said that we should rejoice in this hope. That is, we should “enjoy a state of happiness and well-being.”⁶ It is “to rejoice, to be glad.”⁷ The hope that we have is supposed to be a source of rejoicing, for us. Our hope is something to be celebrated! The idea here is not that the rejoicing is some future realization of our attaining our hope (i.e., we will rejoice when we attain our hope), but rather that we have something for which to rejoice now. Living the Christian life should not be done in some downtrodden manner. Even in the face of persecution, or tribulation, one has a reason to rejoice. We have a hope that is sure, and steadfast, an anchor of our souls (Hebrews 6:19). Why would we not be full of joy, when we understand what awaits us when the sufferings of this life are over? We should be eagerly awaiting the manifestation of our hope!

5 Mott, L.A., Jr. *Thinking Through Romans: Paul’s Gospel Among the Gentiles*. Sunrise Publishing, Jacksonville, FL. pp. 174-183

6 Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 302. Print.

7 *Ibid.*

Patient in tribulation... As we saw in Romans 8, there is a close connection between the tribulation that we face, and the hope that we look forward to. The word that is translated as “patient” in this verse means:

to continue to bear up despite difficulty and suffering—‘to endure, to bear up, to demonstrate endurance, to put up with.’⁸

The idea is that the Christian will not give up. Reading this as the dative suggested by brother Mott, this would be: With respect to tribulation, enduring. What does a Christian look like when tribulation, or persecution comes upon him? He keeps on keeping on. He does not give up. He cannot give up, because he remembers the hope that is set before him! That end of his hope is only attainable if he remains true to the faith of the gospel:

For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell, and by Him to reconcile all things to Himself, by Him, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross. And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard, which was preached to every creature under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister (Colossians 1:19–23).

No matter what we might face here, there is no reason to give up. What awaits us, that for which we hope, is far greater than any momentary suffering we might have to endure.

Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58).

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Romans 8:18).

Continuing steadfastly in prayer... With this comment, Paul was giving instruction as to how one can remain patient in tribulation. God has given us a tool by which we can have contact with Him, and the strength and support that He provides. This is certainly an idea that Paul has expressed elsewhere. In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul said: “Pray without ceasing...” This is the same concept, emphasizing the need to pray steadfastly to the Lord.

Back in Romans 8, we saw that Paul connected the blessing of prayer to being over to overcome the difficulties that we face. There, he revealed that God has given us the Holy Spirit to help us in this endeavor. He is able to help with prayer, even when we do not know quite how to pray, or exactly what to pray for:

Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God (Romans 8:26–27).

What a great advantage God has given to us! He knew just how difficult it was going to be for us to face the tribulations that come with being faithful to Him, and He has not left us alone to deal with those great difficulties. He has opened up the avenue of prayer so that we can talk with Him about the difficulties we face. He has also provided us with His Spirit to help us in that endeavor. We have no reason to stop praying just because we are not sure what to say, or exactly how to pray. We can continue steadfastly in prayer even when we are not sure what to pray, confident that the Holy

⁸ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 307. Print.

Spirit will help in our time of weakness.

Far too often, prayer is the first thing to suffer when we are facing difficult times. We stop going to God when we should be talking to Him more frequently. When we see the promises that God has provided to us, prayer should become easier, and more frequent! Paul's description of a Christian is one who prays steadfastly.

Distributing to the need of the saints, given to hospitality. Paul's next instruction addressed the relationship that Christians could and would have with one another. These two phrases went together, rather than being separate. Paul was giving the Romans instructions about how to care for one another. The first part of his instruction told them to distribute to the need of the saints. The idea here is that they were to help those who were in need among the saints. They needed to consider their brethren, take note of their lack, and provide what they were missing.

The word "distributing" here means "to share one's possessions, with the implication of some kind of joint participation and mutual interest—"to share."⁹ These Christians needed to share what they had with one another. This is the type of thing that was happening in the early days of the church, when Christians were in Jerusalem and did not have enough.

...and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need (Acts 2:45).

Later, in Acts 4, the conditions continued to be such that sharing of possessions was necessary. Luke records that the brethren who were in Jerusalem were willing to sell their property so that they could help those who were in need. Barnabas was one of those brethren, sold his land and gave the proceeds to the apostles (See Acts 4:32-37).

Notice that the actions described here are done of free choice. These brethren were not being forced to give up their belongings, but rather they wanted to *share* with those who were in need. Their love for their brethren was what compelled them to act. Also, notice that Paul's instructions were that they were to share to meet the needs of the saints. This was not about full equality. Those who were rich were not compelled to give provisions to those who just didn't have as much as they did. They were called upon to share with those who were in need. They were not pushing for modern day 'social justice', but rather caring for those who were in need. Another good example of this principle in action is found in Acts 6. There, certain widows were not being cared for as they should have been; they were going hungry. Here, the distribution is made from the funds that were collected and laid at the apostles' feet. However, the idea was still the same. Those who needed provisions for sustenance were provided what they needed. While this certainly does not mean that we cannot go beyond the absolute necessities when helping others, it is important to note that Paul's instructions are not about establishing equality (financially/materially) among the saints, but rather about providing for the needs of the saints. While this need would have been much more prevalent in the first century, it still exists today. We sometimes use the safety nets established in our society as an excuse to avoid fulfilling our own personal responsibilities. Paul's instruction here is for individuals to share with other individuals. We do have a personal responsibility to look out for the needs of our brethren, and share with them when possible.

Paul next said that we are to be "given to hospitality." The idea of hospitality today is far different than when Paul penned this letter. The word means:

34.57 ξενίζω; ξενοδοχέω; φιλοξενία, ας f; ξενίαβ, ας f: to receive and show hospitality to a stranger, that is, someone who is not regarded as a member of the extended family or a close friend— 'to show

9 Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 568. Print.

*hospitality, to receive a stranger as a guest, hospitality.*¹⁰

Lowe and Nida go on to define the word as used in this particular verse as:

*φιλοξενία: τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες 'be eager to show hospitality' Ro 12:13.*¹¹

This is not a task that is burdensome. It is not a task (as we sometimes think today) that is shown toward our good friends and relatives. In fact, the idea of hospitality in the first century was the taking in of strangers. This was a particularly important act of service in the first century, when hotels and motels did not exist. There were some inns that were available, but they were certainly not as prevalent as they are today. Traveling Christians needed a place to stay, and a way to get provisions for their journeys. Think about the travels of the apostle Paul, and men like him. How often was he cared for by saints along his journey?

Paul said that we should be “given to hospitality.” This word, given, is an interesting word. It is the same word that is translated as “persecute” in verse 14 of our context. The word *given* means:

*68.66 διώκωδ: (a figurative extension of meaning of διώκω 'to pursue,' 15.158) to do something with intense effort and with definite purpose or goal— 'to do with effort, to strive toward.'*¹²

The idea of showing hospitality with “intense effort and with definite purpose” is significant! The showing of hospitality is, just like all of the other characteristics expressed by Paul in this context, imperative to being a true Christian. It is interesting that Paul also identifies this characteristic as being essential for those who would serve as elders:

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach;... (1 Timothy 3:2).

And Peter taught that one needs to be hospitable, without grumbling:

And above all things have fervent love for one another, for “love will cover a multitude of sins.” Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God (1 Peter 4:8–10).

Being hospitable is a privilege that is afforded to Christians. It is not a task to be looked upon with drudgery, but rather with excitement. It is not that we “have to show hospitality”, but rather that we “get to show hospitality.” We should be looking for opportunities to share with brethren, even when they are strangers to us. Or perhaps, we should say, especially when they are strangers to us!

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. None of Paul’s directives are particularly easy for us to implement, but when we get to this instruction we can easily see that it goes against our natural inclinations. Paul said that we are to bless those who persecute us. Our natural reaction to that would be to lash out at those who would mistreat us. Paul would go into more detail on this topic shortly (vs. 17-21).

As we mentioned before, the word for “persecute” in verse 14 is the same as the word “given” in verse 13 (see definition above). The idea is that those who were bringing bad things upon the saints were doing so with “intense effort and with definite purpose or goal.” Being a Christian is not an easy task. In fact, we are clearly told that when we are living a life of a Christian, persecution will come upon us:

¹⁰ Louw, Johannes P., and Eugene Albert Nida. *Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: based on semantic domains* 1996 : 453–454. Print.

¹¹ *ibid*: 454. Print.

¹² *ibid*: 662. Print.

Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).

How are we to respond when this persecution comes? Paul said that we are to bless those that persecute us. We are supposed to ask God's blessing on those who would do terrible things to us. How are we supposed to do that? It starts with a change in the way we think. We cannot think in a worldly way and do what Paul instructs in this passage! It would be impossible. Being able to bless a persecutor must come from our realizing that there is much more to our existence than this life. We are more concerned about the eternal wellbeing of another than we are about our own physical wellbeing. We are truly concerned for the soul of the persecutor!

Lest we miss the point, Paul emphasized what action we are supposed to take: "bless and do not curse." Cursing those who would mistreat us in some way would be natural. Paul said that we are not to do that, but rather bless them instead. This instruction places emphasis on our ability to humble ourselves, and put others (even those who are persecuting us) above ourselves in some sense. While Paul did not tell us that we have the same exact responsibilities to those who are not Christians as we do to those who are, here he shows that there is at least a sense in which we think about them before ourselves. After all, if we were to think about ourselves first, we would never "bless those who persecute" us.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Throughout this context, we have seen the idea of a close relationship being established between those who are brethren. Verses 9 through 11 began to establish that concept, and verse 13 drove home the importance of the relationship. Verse 15 emphasizes the emotional connection that we have with one another as Christians. It is not just about getting things done. There is more to our relationship than just making sure that no one goes hungry or homeless. We should be emotionally invested in one another.

This concept is the end result of having the kind of familial relationship that God wants in His church. When we have that type of close relationship, then we are going to have a deep emotional connection to our brethren. When they are suffering, we will suffer with them. When they are celebrating, we will celebrate with them. When we have the kind of love that Paul has already described earlier in the context, how can we think of our brethren in a negative way? Why would we ever be happy that they are suffering? Or be upset because things are going well with them? Those reactions reflect jealousy and greed rather than brotherly love and affection. Once again, it becomes evident that a change in the way that we think is necessary. We cannot be self centered and act the way Paul described here. When we put others ahead of ourselves, and humble ourselves before God, then we are able to put things around us into perspective. We will become much more focused on what is going on in the lives of our brethren, and connect emotionally with them. We should want to be there to support them, whether it is in time of rejoicing, or weeping!

Be of the same mind toward one another. As Paul begins to draw to this context to a close, he turns the discussion to the way that we think. As we have been pointing out throughout the context, implementing Paul's instructions are reliant upon this change of thinking.

Paul wanted the brethren in Rome to realize that they all needed to think about, and care for, one another in the same way. These were not instructions for rich people only, allowing the poor to have some kind of an entitlement attitude toward them. These were not instructions for those in difficult circumstances to demand something of those who were not. This was a way of thinking toward brethren. Sometimes, you would be the one weeping, and need a brother or sister to be there for you and comfort you. Sometimes, you would be the one comforting one who was weeping.

How do we adopt this mindset? Paul said, "Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble." The "high things" of this passage contrast with the humble. He is saying that we can-

not be puffed up in ourselves. This is very similar to what Paul wrote to the Philippian brethren:

Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:1–7).

When everyone thinks the same way, and has the same consideration for all of their brethren, then the ability to function together as a local body, and implement all of the teachings that Paul has recorded here, become much easier. Paul ended this idea by telling his audience that they should not be wise in their own opinion. This too speaks to a different way of thinking. It is not uncommon for mankind to become quite puffed up in his own eyes. He devises his own standard for what is wise, and then becomes arrogant in his fulfillment of it. Adopting God's way of thinking, and conforming to His wisdom looks completely different. In fact, there are many warnings in scripture to avoid this particular mindset.

Answer a fool according to his folly, Lest he be wise in his own eyes (Proverbs 26:5).

Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him (Proverbs 26:12).

Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, And prudent in their own sight! (Isaiah 5:21)

This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. (James 3:15–18).

We cannot become puffed up in our own thinking. We must learn to humble ourselves, and then associate with those of like mindset. Such an approach will lead us to have peace among the brethren, and will also allow us to live in peace with those around us. Paul would extend his teaching and application to those around the Christian in the concluding verses of chapter 12.

Repay no one evil for evil. Earlier, Paul called upon the Christian to bless those who were persecuting them. Now, he tells them that they are not to seek revenge on those who would do evil to them. It was (and is) not the Christian's responsibility to take revenge on one who brings evil upon them.

Instead of returning evil for evil, Paul told this audience that they should instead "Have regard for good things in the sight of all men." They were to think about what would show a good example in the sight of all men. The natural response when someone did something bad would be to try and get even, or worse! Paul made it clear that the Christian does not respond in that manner. Instead they behave in such a way as to do what is right, and good in the sight of all. Jesus taught this principle as well:

"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. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away. (Matthew 5:38–42).

This does not fit with what we think of as a typical response! The Christian response is going to be

far different than the worldly response. We are not supposed to be focused on our own wellbeing, but rather the glory of God. A Christian cannot have this type of godly response without having planned to do so before they have faced mistreatment. When Paul taught that one was to “have regard for good things in the sight of all men” he was making it clear that one had to consider what was good! He had to consider that beforehand, and not leave the reaction to the moment. Only by considering these outcomes ahead of time can one respond correctly in the moment!

“As much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” Paul continued the idea of our relations with others by telling the Christian that they have a responsibility, as much as depends on them, to live in peace with all. Paul acknowledged in this teaching that sometimes peace would be disturbed and the Christian could do nothing about it. However, Paul made it clear that if the peace was disturbed, then it better not be the fault of the Christian! Obviously, there would be instances in which the Christian could not sacrifice truth for the sake of peace. Paul was not telling us that we should compromise the gospel to maintain relationship. He was making it clear that when it came to any situation that we can compromise, we should be willing to do so for the sake of peace. This principle once again established the principle that the Christian is to put wellbeing of others ahead of themselves. The Christian is willing to even be wronged, and harmed, for the sake of maintaining the peace. One who insists on their own way at all times will never be cultivating peace!

“Do not avenge yourselves...” As Paul continued his thought in verse 19, he showed just how far the idea of “as much as depends on you” from verse 18 was to be taken. In the event that someone does something terrible to you, it is not your place as a Christian to take vengeance for yourself. This is a reflection of the idea established in verse 17 that the Christian is to “Repay no one evil for evil.” God has not placed the responsibility upon us to seek out vengeance on those who do us wrong. The Christians that Paul wrote to were going to face terrible persecution. They needed to be reminded that it was not up to them to strike out against those would do them harm.

Paul did not, however, leave the Christians with the impression that those who did evil would get away with their ungodly actions. He told these brethren to “give place for wrath.” The idea here is that they were to get out of the way, and let the right wrath be unleashed. God was in control of that, and they did not need to interfere with His actions.

Notice that the vengeance that Paul cites is not confined to the final judgment. As we progress into chapter 13, we see that God has made provision for His wrath to be exercised upon the ungodly. However, if that does not happen, if the systems that God has established fail because of ungodliness among the people in those systems, it is still not our responsibility to seek out our own vengeance. God will have His final judgment, and mete out justice to the ungodly.

Rather than seeking out vengeance, Paul said that the Christian is to act in exactly the opposite manner. “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” This is a quote from Proverbs 25:21-22. This shows that this was a principle that God had for His people for a long time! He was in charge of meting out vengeance, and His people were not to burden themselves with such things!

Paul concluded this section by reminding the Christian that he is New Testament to be overcome with evil, but rather overcome evil with good. Our job is to do good, no matter what. We cannot allow the evil that surrounds us to overcome us. Rather, we work constantly to try and conquer that evil with good. We may not have the kind of reach that we would like, but we have some impact on our own communities, and over our own sphere of influence. We have the all powerful gospel message to change the hearts and minds of men. God has tasked us with the responsibility of using that gospel message to overcome evil! Let us commit ourselves to good, and fight against evil!

Questions...

1. How are Christians expected to change the way that they think, compared to their lives before becoming Christians?
2. What are the 9 “datives of respect” that are addressed by Paul in Romans 12? How do these speak directly to the actions of the Christian?
3. How do the instructions of Romans 12 stand in contrast to what one may consider “natural reactions” to common situations?
4. How should the Christian respond to one who persecutes them? Why?
5. Paul said to “Repay no one evil for evil.” To whom does this apply? Are there exceptions for when the Christian is permitted to return evil for evil?
6. What situations might allow the Christian to violate the instruction to “live peaceably with all men”? Are there times when this is not a requirement for God’s people?