

- F. Conclusion: Praise to God in Light of His Awesome Plan (11:33–36): “Paul appropriately concludes one of his most profound and difficult theological discussions with a hymn in praise of God for his purposes and plans... Throughout Rom. 9–11, while certain points remain hard to understand, Paul is claiming to be transmitting truth to which his readers are to respond. And Paul certainly teaches elsewhere that in Christ, and through the Spirit, we have access to ‘the secret and hidden wisdom of God’ (1 Cor. 2:6–16). We should, then, perhaps understand Paul’s praise to be motivated not so much by the hiddenness of God’s ways but by the (admittedly partial) revelation of those mind-transcending ways to us” (Moo, 759).
- V. The Transforming Power of the Gospel: Christian Conduct (12:1–15:13): In Romans 12:1, Paul switches to mainly giving Roman Christian commands regarding how they should live. Rather than being an appendix or “add-on” to the section preceding it, this section is an essential description of the transformation produced by the Spirit through the preaching of the gospel.⁸¹ “The imperative of a transformed life is... not an optional second step after we embrace the gospel: it is rooted in and, indeed, part of the gospel itself... To eliminate this part of Romans would be therefore to omit an indispensable dimension of the gospel” (Moo, 763). This section has two main parts—the commands that Paul gives in chapters 12–13, which apply to all believers, and his instructions regarding a specific issue that threatened the unity of the Roman church (14:1–15:13) (Schreiner, 622; Moo, 765). However, even that specific dilemma is addressed in such a way that what Paul says applies to all congregations, including our own.
- A. The Heart of the Matter: Total Transformation (12:1–2)⁸²
- These first two verses of the section serve as a heading or summary of what follows in 12:3–15:13. The opening “**Therefore**” (v. 1) connects what Paul is about to say with his teaching in chapters 1–11. Paul is “urging” the believers (not quite a command but much stronger than a simple request) to “offer” their “bodies” as a “sacrifice.” The Christian’s service to God takes the place of the sacrifices offered in the OT as expressions of *thanks* (not sin offerings) to God (see also Phil 4:18; 1 Peter 2:5).

⁸¹ Paul frequently transitions in his letters from describing what God has done for believers through Christ to what believers, empowered by the Spirit, are able to do and must do in response (cf. the transition at Eph 4:1 and 1 Thess 4:1). This two-part method of instruction (which in Paul’s case was a right conduct based on a right view of God and the work of Christ) was likely common in Paul’s day and would have been recognized by an average reader. For example, the Stoic philosopher Seneca, who was advising Nero at the time that Paul was writing to the Romans, said, “Virtue is divided into two parts... into contemplation of truth, and conduct” (*Ep.* 94.45; quoted by Thielman, 563). However, the Stoics did not have a right view of sin and, unlike Paul, would not have seen right conduct as the result of a new birth produced by the Spirit.

⁸² On these two verses I was especially helped, not only by the commentaries of Moo, Schreiner, and Thielman, but also by William W. Combs, “Romans 12:1–2 and the Doctrine of Sanctification,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 11 (2006): 3–24.

- Paul makes this strong appeal “**in view of God’s mercy**” (v. 1). This prepositional phrase is not the usual way of indicating the basis for a statement, and you could even say that, in a sense, “God’s mercy” is the source of the appeal, while Paul is merely the instrument that is communicating the appeal (Moo, 769).⁸³ Paul also uses the preposition this same way in Romans 15:30 (where Christ and “love of the Spirit” are the ultimate sources), 1 Corinthians 1:10 (where Christ again is the ultimate source); 2 Corinthians 10:1 (where the “humility and gentleness of Christ” is the ultimate source). We are not to do the things that Paul is about to describe as the basis for God’s mercy. God has already been merciful to us, and his mercy calls us to respond by offering ourselves.
- Paul uses a plural noun for “**mercy**” (see, e.g., “mercies” in NASB, ESV, etc.), likely because he is thinking of a similar Hebrew word, which is always plural but has a singular meaning and is often used in the OT (e.g., Gen 43:14; Deut 13:17; Jer 42:12) to describe the mercy or compassion that God shows to his people (Schreiner, 625; Moo, 767 n 21). Everything that Paul has just described in 1:16ff is a demonstration of God’s mercy, and this mercy calls us to live a certain way, but not to “repay” God. To review:
 - God found us when we were worshiping the creation instead of the Creator and rightly deserving of his wrath (1:18–32).
 - We were completely unable to make ourselves right before God by keeping his just requirements, so he, as an impartial judge, would have been right to condemn us all to eternal death (2:1–3:20).
 - However, God sent his Son to be the sacrifice for our sins, and we are declared right with God when we trust in his Son (3:21–4:25).
 - Not only have we been declared right, but we have also been given the Spirit, and neither death, sin, nor the Law will be an obstacle to our future glorification (5:1–8:39). We who are trusting in Christ have been made new and will be forever in Christ’s perfect kingdom, and nothing will separate us from him.
 - Finally, God’s dealings with the people of Israel further illustrate that we who have been rescued from God’s wrath have only been saved as a result of his mercy (9:1–11:32—“**so that he may have mercy on them all,**” 11:31). God would have been just to leave us as objects of his wrath, but instead he made us objects of his mercy.
- By “**bodies,**” Paul is referring to the whole person. It is an example of a whole referred to by one of its significant parts (a synecdoche) like our expression “offer your hand in marriage.” We are to offer our whole person as a sacrifice to God.
- Older scholars sometimes emphasized the tense of the Greek word translated “**offer**” in arguing that this is a one-time or “once-for-all” act (e.g., Godet).⁸⁴ In preaching and

⁸³ Thielman tries to capture the nuance of the preposition with “God’s pity expressed in the gospel Paul has just described in 1:16–11:36, provides the basis for the appeal, fueling it and sending it forward (cf. 2 Cor 10:1)” (567).

⁸⁴ This idea is still found in more recent commentaries, e.g., Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: B & H, 1995), 231–32.

writing, this “one-time” act was then sometimes associated with a post-conversion decision to dedicate one’s life to Christ or to accept Jesus as one’s Lord as a necessary step to progress further in sanctification. However, we now know that this is a serious misunderstanding of how the tense system works in Greek.⁸⁵ Therefore, Paul says that this must be done without saying anything about how often it should be done. The following context clarifies that it is an *ongoing* sacrifice throughout the believer’s life.

- Paul describes this sacrifice with three words—it is (1) “**living**,” (2) “**holy**,” and (3) “acceptable” (NASB, ESV) or “**pleasing**” (NIV, CSB, NET) to God. First, the sacrifice consists of a living person’s actions, thoughts, and affections and not in the death of an animal. Second, the believer offering himself as a sacrifice is set apart for God’s service as certain people and objects were “holy” or “set apart” for God’s service in the OT. Third, this is a sacrifice that pleases God and is accepted by him. It is what he has asked for instead of being something that we decided to offer on our own.
- The end of verse 1 describes the offering one final way, but there is disagreement among our English versions on how best to translate the expression. For example, the NASB describes the offering of the believer as a “spiritual service of worship” or, as the NASB footnote puts it, “rational” worship. The NET and the KJV translate this as “your reasonable service.” The CSB has “true worship.” The differences in the translations illustrate the difficulty in translating an adjective, which only appears in the NT here and 1 Peter 2:2 (where it means something like “word-based” or “consisting of the word”). The NET and the KJV seem to best capture the meaning here in Romans 12, although the NIV is helpful in adding “**proper**.” “Paul is stressing the need for worship that is appropriate to those who have rightly understood the truth of the gospel as it has been revealed in Christ.”⁸⁶ This worship contrasts with the foolish and improper worship offered by pagans to objects that are not the true God (cf. Rom 1:25).
- In **verse 2**, Paul begins to explain how this sacrifice is carried out. The believer offers himself as a sacrifice to God by not being “**conform[ed] to the pattern of this world**” and positively by being “**transformed by the renewing**” of his mind. Transformation is the goal, and renewal of the mind is the means. The verb “**offer**” in verse 1 viewed the entire sacrifice as a whole. These two verbs in verse 2 describe the ongoing actions that make up this sacrifice, demonstrating that the sacrifice is not a “once-for-all” event but is instead an ongoing act of worship in the believer’s life.⁸⁷ Believers must resist the

⁸⁵ “For instance, when Paul told the Corinthians to ‘glorify God in your body’ (1 Cor 6:2),” the tense (same as used in Rom 12:1 for “present”) “does not mean that the apostle only wanted them to do it one time.” Combs, “Romans 12:1–2,” 14.

⁸⁶ Combs, 18. Cf. “His purpose... was to emphasize that yielding one’s whole self to God is eminently reasonable. Since God has been so merciful, failure to dedicate one’s life to him is the height of folly and irrationality” (Schreiner, 628).

⁸⁷ “Regular meetings together of Christians for praise and mutual edification are appropriate and, indeed, commanded in Scripture. And what happens at these meetings is certainly ‘worship.’ But such special times of corporate

- pressure to conform to the worldview of this “age” (perhaps a better translation than “**world**”; see, e.g., CSB), which is passing away,⁸⁸ and instead, by renewing their minds, they must participate with God’s work of making them into the image of Christ. This is a renewal that began at our conversion (Titus 3:5), continues through our life (Col 3:10; 2 Cor 3:18), and will be completed by the transformation that occurs when Christ returns for us (Phil 3:21). In a sense, this is a “reprogramming of our minds” (Combs, 22; cf. Moo, 755), but, like the commands in 12:3ff indicate, this is a renewed thinking that results in new affections and actions. It is a gradual transformation of our whole being.
- The purpose (“so that” or “**then**” in **v. 2b**) of this transformation is that the condition described in Romans 1:28 (“God gave them over to a depraved mind”) might be reversed—the believer is now able to know what is “**good, pleasing and perfect.**” As our minds are gradually renewed, we will become increasingly able to discern what would be pleasing to our God. However, since this process is never complete, God has also left us with “some revealed, objective standards against which to measure our behavior”—i.e., the Law of Christ found in the NT (Moo, 776), some of which is found in 12:3ff. So, to review, we have a role to carry out in our own sanctification. It is not merely conforming on the outside to a set of rules but is a gradual transformation of our whole being. Its goal is our conformity to God’s will. And in the following verses, Paul will describe some of what this will look like in our lives.

B. Humility and Mutual Service (12:3–8)

- The central command of this paragraph comes in **verse 3** and uses a play on the word “**think**”—“We are not to ‘think’ too highly of ourselves but to ‘think’ in a realistic-thinking kind of way” (Moo, 164; Paul uses related Greek words for “thinking,” that all sound similar, four times within ten total words).
- The exhortations in 12:3–13:14 are united by the theme of believers loving one another (Naselli, 155; cf. 12:9, 10; 13:8–10). And this opening paragraph addresses a significant obstacle to brotherly love—pride.
- Just as a human body has different parts with different functions, God has given different gifts with corresponding responsibilities to different members of the Body of Christ, and these gifts must be used (**vv. 4–8**). However, no one person exercising their gifts should think of themselves more highly than they ought to think (**v. 3**). We should not be proud, but we also should not despair or think too lowly of ourselves. Instead, we

worship are only one aspect of the continual worship that each of us is to offer the Lord in the sacrifice of our bodies day by day” (Moo, 773).

⁸⁸ Paul uses the same word to describe this present, evil age ruled by Satan in 2 Cor 4:4; Gal 1:4; Eph 2:2. It “is the sin-dominated, death-producing realm in which all people, included in Adam’s fall, naturally belong” (Moo, 773).

should accept that we each have been given a role to carry out in building Christ's church and have been empowered by the Spirit to carry out this role (v. 6a).

- In the early church, these gifts included the gift of prophecy, which was the ability to receive special revelation from God and communicate it to his people. This NT gift of prophecy, assuming that it was the genuine gift from God, was inerrant and had equal authority with OT prophecy (here I disagree with *EBR*, 165).⁸⁹ Paul told the Corinthians that this gift would cease at some point (1 Cor 13:8), and I would argue that it did cease once the NT canon was completed.⁹⁰ The phrase “**in accordance with your faith**” at the end of **verse 6** is very difficult to understand, and various interpretations have been proposed. However, “**faith**” in this context likely refers to the prophet's confidence that he is in fact speaking on behalf of God—“the prophet should not go beyond the insight God has given but should modestly stay within these bounds when speaking a word of edification or direction” (Thielman, 575).

C. Love and Its Manifestations (12:9–21)

- Paul begins this section with a simple phrase—“**Love must be sincere**” (v. 9), a heading for this section with what follows being a description of genuine or sincere love (*EBR*, 166). Genuine love is to be expressed toward believers and unbelievers.
- Much in this section appears to be drawn directly from Jesus' own teaching (e.g., Mt 5:44; Luke 6:27–28). It is relatively easy to understand most of what Paul says in this section; the challenge is to carry out his instructions, especially the calls to not “**repay anyone evil for evil**” (v. 17) and not seek revenge (v. 19).
- Some of the instructions have to do with our relationship with God. We are supposed to be characterized by joy and hope and be faithful in prayer (v. 12).
- Many of the instructions have to do with our relationship with fellow believers:
 - We are supposed to share with those who have needs (v. 13a).
 - We are supposed to be hospitable (v. 13b).
 - We are supposed to live in harmony with one another (v. 16a).
 - We are supposed to be humble and associate with people of low social positions (v. 16b).
- The one portion of this section that is probably hardest to understand is the reference to “**burning coals**” on the head of our enemy in **verse 20**. Verse 20 is a quotation of Proverbs 25:21–22a, but recognizing that does not eliminate all of the questions:

⁸⁹ For the arguments in favor of the position that OT and NT prophecy were both inerrant and equally authoritative see esp. R. Bruce Compton, “The Continuation of New Testament Prophecy and a Closed Canon: Revisiting Wayne Grudem's Two Levels of NT Prophecy,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 22 (2017).

⁹⁰ See esp. R. Bruce Compton, “1 Corinthians 13:8–13 and the Cessation of Miraculous Gifts,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 9 (2004).

- Some have seen here a reference to an ancient Egyptian reconciliation ritual. However, the evidence for this ritual is slim, and Paul was likely not aware of this ritual. Even if this ritual stood behind the original proverb, and that is debatable, it is unlikely that Paul would have quoted a proverb without understanding its meaning.
- Usually, words like “coals” and “fire” refer to God’s judgment (e.g., 2 Sam 22:9; Pss 18:8; 140:10). The meaning then would be that if our enemy does not repent, our acts of kindness will be the basis for their judgment (Schreiner, 656; Keener, 150; Naselli, 164). Paul would be “encouraging believers to leave the judgment of their enemies’ evil deeds to God” (as explained by Thielman, 596).
- The majority view is that our kindness will lead our enemies to have burning shame and remorse for how they have treated us, leading hopefully to repentance (Kruse, 485; Moo, 806; Harrison and Hagner, 192; Hendriksen, 423).
- A decision between the last two options is difficult, but based on the way words like “coal” and “fire” are typically used, I think the second option is most likely. In verse 19, Paul acknowledged that God would repay those who have wronged his children. “Similarly, Jesus could refrain from curing his adversaries because he entrusted himself to God, ‘who judges righteously’ (1 Pet 2:23). The sure realization that God will vindicate us frees us to love others and to do good to them, and even to pray that God will bless them (Rom. 12:14) and bring them to repentance. Believers will not chafe at any oppressor being brought to repentance, because they trust the goodness and justice of God, knowing that he does all things well and that they themselves were deserving of wrath (1:18–3:20)” (Schreiner, 656–57).

D. The Christian and Secular Rulers (13:1–7)

- Paul likely has several reasons for addressing the Christian’s responsibility to the government (from *EBR*, 170). First, after stressing that believers no longer belong to this world or age, it is helpful to be reminded that we still live in it and have responsibilities to its rulers. Second, taxes were just as unpopular then as they are today, and there may have been current unrest in Rome over taxation. Third, while believers are not to personally take vengeance upon their enemies, they can often receive relief from governments, which are God’s instruments of wrath upon those who do evil. As a general rule, governments punish those who do what is wrong.
- Human rulers are God’s servants, whether they realize it or not, so rebellion against them is rebellion against God (**vv. 1–2**).⁹¹ We not only obey the government to avoid punishment but also because our conscience tells us that it is right to obey (**v. 5**).

⁹¹ Paul gives the main command in v. 1a: “**be subject to the governing authorities**.” Then he gives the first reason for v. 1a in v. 1b—as a general rule, resisting government is resisting God and will bring God’s judgment. V. 2 is an inference of v. 1b, and then, in v. 3a, Paul gives a second reason for v. 1b—government fulfills an important role by promoting good behavior. The inference from this second reason is that we should do good (vv. 3b–4a). Paul reinforces