

COMMON SENSE COMMENTARY SERIES

WHO IS GOD AND WHAT DOES HE WANT (VOL 2)

● PHILIPPI

● GALATIA

● COLOSSAE

● EPHESUS

Optomistic, conversational,
thought-provoking commentary
on chapters 9-16 of Paul's
letter to the
Romans

C CLIFTON JONES

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Vol. 2 (Romans 9-16)

An optimistic, conversational, thought-provoking commentary on Chapters 9-16 of Paul's letter to the Romans.

First Edition (1.1)

C Clifton Jones

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgments.....	9
Preface	10
An imperfect commentary.....	10
A conversational commentary.....	10
A thought-provoking commentary	11
A verse-by-verse commentary.....	11
An optimistic commentary.....	12
Introduction	14
Part III continued: The Explanation (Romans 4-11)	17
1. God Rules Over Everything (Romans 9:1-5).....	18
Introduction	18
A brief review of Volume 1	19
A Heart Filled with Sorrow (9:1).....	23
The chosen people of Israel (9:4).....	25
2. God Gets to Choose (Romans 9:6-18).....	30
True Israel (9:6)	30
Choosing with a Purpose (9:7)	32
A Hardened Heart (9:14).....	35
3. Questioning God (Romans 9:19-33).....	39
Arguing with God (9:19).....	39
Destined for Destruction? (9:22b)	42
The great rock of stumbling (9:25).....	45

4. Confessing and Believing (Romans 10:1-13)	50
Misdirected Zeal (10:1).....	50
Faith’s Way of Getting Right (10:5)	55
5. Faith Comes from Hearing (Romans 10:14-21)	59
Going, telling, hearing, believing (10:14)	59
Jealousy Aroused (10:16)	62
6. Undeserved Kindness (Romans 11:1-10).....	65
Does God reject people? (11:1).....	65
The last man standing (11:1b).....	68
Closed eyes and ears (11:7).....	70
7. Salvation of All Humanity (Romans 11:11-21).....	74
Parts are as holy as the whole (11:11)	74
Broken off and grafted in (11:17).....	77
8. Kindness and Severity of God (Romans 11:22-36)	80
Trusting God’s kindness (11:22)	80
All “Israel” will be saved (11:25).....	83
Mercy bestowed on everyone (11:28)	85
Everything comes from God (11:33)	90
Part IV: The Results (Romans 12-16)	92
9. A Living Sacrifice (Romans 12:1-3).....	93
A quick review	94
Living sacrifices (12:1).....	97
Change the way you think (12:2).....	100
Don’t see yourself as better than you are (12:3)	102
10. We Are Just One of Many (Romans 12:4-8)	105
Members of each other (12:4)	105

Prophesy, serving, and teaching (12:6).....	107
Encouraging and giving (12:7b).....	110
Leading and showing kindness (12:8b)	114
11. Genuine Love (Romans 12:9-13).....	116
Genuine love (12:9).....	116
Living sacrifices.....	118
Work hard and never be lazy (12:11).....	122
12. Live in Harmony (Romans 12:14-18).....	124
Bless Your Persecutors (12:14)	124
Live at peace with all people (12:17)	128
13. Never Take Revenge (Romans 12:19-21).....	130
Leave it up to God (12:19).....	130
Love your enemies (12:20).....	132
Heaping burning coals.....	134
Good reasons for responding right	136
14. Respect Civil Authorities (Romans 13:1-3).....	139
Introduction	139
Authority is from God (13:1)	142
Fear of authorities (13:3)	144
15. Listen to Your Conscience (Romans 13:4-5).....	146
God’s servants (13:4)	146
Submit appropriately (13:5).....	149
16. Love Is God’s Requirement (Romans 13:6-10).....	153
Give everyone what you owe them (13:6)	153
Owe nothing to anyone (13:8).....	155
Love your neighbor (13:8b).....	157

17. Time Is Running Out (Romans 13:11-14).....	161
Live decent lives (13:11)	161
Clothe yourselves with Jesus (13:14)	163
Loving misery.....	165
18. Honor the values of Others (Romans 14:1-13).....	168
Who are you to condemn others? (14:1)	168
Live and die to honor God (14:5).....	171
Judging others (14:10)	173
19. Follow Your Convictions (Romans 14:14-23).....	177
Ruining others (14:14)	177
The kingdom of God (14:17).....	179
20. Live in Complete Harmony (Romans 15:1-13).....	184
Build each other up (15:1)	184
Things written to teach us (15:4)	186
Live in complete harmony (15:5).....	189
21. We All Need a Reminder (Romans 15:14-22).....	192
You need a reminder (15:14).....	192
Why Paul was needed	196
A special messenger (15:15b).....	199
The Good News fully presented (15:19b).....	202
22. I Have Finished My Work (Romans 15:23-33)	205
I have finished my work (15:23)	205
The significance of prayer.....	207
23. True Friends (Romans 16:1-27)	212
Greet, greet, greet (16:1)	212
Watch out for divisions (16:17)	217

The secret plan revealed (16:21) 220
About The Common Sense Commentary Series 223
About The Author 224

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Preface

An imperfect commentary

This commentary leaves a lot to be desired. Of this, I am painfully aware. But at the same time, I hope it will encourage some people, especially those under the spiritual bondage of laws, rules, regulations, and control, which are widespread today.

I've spent the last fifty years carefully reading many systematic theologies, commentaries, and well-written books. So, I am very aware of how far I have fallen short of the high bar that's been set before me. My approach in this commentary differs from most of those I've read, admired, and benefited from over the years. My only complaint about most good commentaries is that they are difficult to get through. So, I've tried to write something anyone can read and relate to.

A conversational commentary

I've attempted to make this commentary conversational. That is, I want readers to feel they are having a *conversation* about the subject at hand. For me, this means saying things using common, informal language – even using folksy and slang terms at times – just as most people do when talking with their friends. This makes my commentary a bit wordy, but my goal is for the reader to relax, enjoy the ride, and settle in for a journey through one of Paul's letters which he writes so passionately.

However, I've also tried to include some background information and explain words used in the original language – Greek. But this is a *comment-ary*, so I have commented as I felt it might be helpful and appropriate. It is left to the reader to investigate things more carefully if so desired.

A thought-provoking commentary

I have also tried to be thought-provoking. This is more of my goal than having readers automatically accept what I write. I always encourage people to take Paul's advice and “Examine everything carefully.” You are always better off doing that than blindly trusting anyone. Always take everything you hear and read directly to God for his take on what is true. Your ability to do this (as granted to everyone by God) is greater than most teachers and writers want you to believe. God will never fail you. Trust him.

A verse-by-verse commentary

At best, I am a rank amateur when it comes to the Greek language. I took my first year of Greek from Darell Bock at Dallas Theological Seminary in 1982. I also completed a video course by Bill Mounce (as a refresher) about 30 years later. Then, as an attempt to get my second year of Greek under my belt, I worked through Daniel Wallace's excellent and thorough book, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*. So, I depend on those who have dedicated their life to being experts in this ancient language, and so I learn from them.

However, I do know Greek well enough to understand what they are saying when they weigh in on the New Testament writings. Translation and interpretation of any language is both an art and a science. One big thing I learned from Wallace is that all translators interpret, to some degree, when they translate.

From Mounce, I learned that “common sense is your best friend” when translating any text.

So, though I depend on those who know Greek better than I do, I still check and double-check them against each other, use common sense, and do not just assume any translation is perfect. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says there is “safety in a multitude of counselors,” which certainly applies here.

Some translations are very literal renderings of the original New Testament text in an attempt to be as accurate as possible. Others are very loose and flexible, desiring to express the original author’s intent in English. There are disadvantages to each method, and there is no perfect way to translate anything from one language to another. So, I try to combine all these principles into the text I use in my commentaries. I want it both readable and accurate, and sometimes these two goals are at odds with each other. The translation I use is a combination of many. However, I am convinced that if readers use common sense, read with the full context in mind, and seek God for understanding, pretty much any popular translation will be sufficient.

In my commentaries, every time a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, I use a different font so it will stand out. The font I use is a *handwriting font that looks like this*. When you see this, a new portion of the New Testament text is introduced, followed by the comments of this commentary.

An optimistic commentary

Finally, and perhaps this is the most important feature of my commentary, I try to present God, life, and eternity in the most optimistic perspective possible. I do this simply because this is how Paul and all the other New Testament writers present God. This is not to say there is never anything harsh or severe spoken about God. There is! But as Paul once wrote, “Behold the goodness and severity of God.” He presents a balance of how to

view God. Essentially, he is saying that God is *severe in his goodness* but also *good in his severity*. And this is the key. Despite any severity that he allows and brings, the goodness of God always represents who God is and how he operates. He always acts in goodness and wants the very best for all humanity that he so loves and created in his own image

Introduction

Romans is the longest of Paul's 13 letters. Philippians is very heartfelt. Galatians is an in-your-face warning about never going back under the law. Ephesians is a high and lofty letter about God and all the good things He has in store for us. Romans is not only longer, but also more academic. It reads more like a short book. I like to call it *Christianity 101, 102, 103...* because it covers just about every aspect of the Christian faith, just like taking a sequence of college courses on a particular subject.

When I was a kid, we learned *the Romans Road*, which was a sequential selection of verses that presented the way of salvation. It consisted of Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," followed by Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death," then Romans 10:9, "If you confess Jesus as Lord and believe God raised him from the dead, you'll be saved." There were probably a couple of other verses in there, but this was the gist of it. It's easy to see the progression: we're all sinners, resulting in death, but we can be saved by believing in Jesus. That's a nice summary of the plan of salvation consistently taught in the New Testament, but we are wise to be cautious about taking verses out of context, which can result in something different than what the original author intended. What about all the verses in between the Romans Road verses? How do they help us gain an accurate picture of who God is and what He wants?

This commentary (as I do in all my commentaries) goes through Paul's letter verse by verse, attempting to consider the immediate and greater context of what Paul is writing. To ignore

this is to miss what Paul is trying to say and, instead, interpret his letter by what someone else has imposed on the text, or through our own personal interpretation and preferences. Peter wrote in his first letter that sacred writings are not a matter of one's own personal interpretation. This is because each author in the New Testament has something he wants to say, and our job is to find out what that is and to guard against imposing some unintended meaning on what is written. We impose such misunderstandings to our own loss.

Many people today live under huge misunderstandings of the message of the New Testament writings. Make no mistake, my commentaries are no exception and undoubtedly have many places where inaccuracies exist. That is why it is ultimately the job of you, the reader, to do your own homework carefully and take everything to God for final approval. If you feel He is telling you that this commentary is wrong at some point, listen to Him. God is never wrong and will never lead you astray, even though it may take time, plus some trial and error for you to figure it out with Him. Never forget Paul's exhortation, "Examine everything carefully, and then cling to that which proves itself to be right and good." You can only do this with God's help!

There's a lot going on in this long letter, and it's quite different than what you will find in the Gospels (which were written many years after Paul's writings). This Roman letter is different from Paul's other letters. It's a little more academic, not quite as heartfelt as Second Corinthians or Philippians. It is quite comprehensive, covering all major aspects of the original Christian faith. Be careful not to mingle Paul's basic and clear message with all that came out of the Fourth Century, which became the substance of much that is believed in modern-day Christianity. At least five popular doctrinal positions today originated (or were popularized) during the Fourth Century,

turning the simple Christian *faith* into yet another world *religion*.

These are:

1. The New Testament Canon (officially designated writings).
2. The doctrine of the trinity (three persons, each fully God, and yet only one God).
3. Hell and damnation (rendering God as one who eventually gives up on people and abandons His “desire for all to be saved”).
4. Total depravity of humanity (making all people unworthy of salvation instead of seeing them as infinitely valuable to God, who loves them unconditionally).
5. A violent view of Christ’s atonement (where the Father inflicts retaliating pain on His innocent Son rather than on humans who supposedly deserve it).

You will find none of these teachings in Paul’s writings nor in the rest of the New Testament – not in the advanced, refined forms that came out of the A.D. 300s. Keep this in mind as you work your way through this letter of Paul’s to the believers in Rome!

**Part III continued:
The Explanation
(Romans 4-11)**

1. God Rules Over Everything (Romans 9:1-5)

Introduction

We now find ourselves right in the middle of Paul's letter to the Romans. There are a total of sixteen chapters, and we just finished chapter eight at the end of volume 1 of this commentary. So, we're about halfway through.

You may recall that in Volume 1, I offered a simple analysis of this letter, which serves well in revealing Paul's general direction and thinking: In chapters 1, 2, and the first half of 3, Paul presents the *problem* that is experienced by all humanity, which is our sin (missing the mark) and all the consequences that come with it. Then, in the second half of Chapter 3, he presents a very short *solution* to the problem. This solution is found only in Jesus, through his death and resurrection. After that, Paul begins the longest part of his letter, where he *explains* the *solution* that solves the *problem*. This is found in chapters 4–11. Later in this second volume, starting in Chapter 12, Paul will present the *results* of all the *explanations* he has given about the *solution* that solves the *problem*. This, I believe, was the outline in Paul's mind as he wrote this letter to the believers in Rome.

This ninth chapter of Paul's letter is probably the most controversial and abused chapter in the New Testament. Right or wrong, it has been weaponized as the *go-to text* to prove that God chooses some humans to be saved over the rest of humanity, whom He torments forever. However, as we will see when we

reach the middle of Chapter 9, this is clearly not Paul's meaning regarding God's act of choosing. We will also see the kindness, love, and grace that God has for all of creation throughout chapters 9–11 as Paul answers the questions he rhetorically asks concerning Israel. However, it will also be made clear that God sometimes acts in *severity* when dealing with people, yet always with the goal of redemption, restoration, and salvation. God never acts in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose whatsoever. It is not how love behaves!

This all becomes quite interesting as Paul continues his explanation in the latter part of his letter, up through chapter 11. However, all foundational explanations about salvation in Jesus (the solution) were presented fully by Paul in chapters 4–8. Chapters 9–11 are a stark contrast to all that came before them. Chapter 8 ends on the highest peak possible with Paul's declaration that "nothing can separate us from God's love." But now in chapter 9, we are headed back down into the valley of further explanation, as Paul turns his attention toward answering the question, "What about the Jews?"

A brief review of Volume 1

Paul's letter to the believers in Rome is his longest letter, and my commentary on it came to around 600 pages. This is a little too big for one volume, so I decided to make it into two. Fortunately, there is a very convenient break between chapters 8 and 9, even though it is in the middle of his *explanation* part of the letter. There needs to be a break since chapter 8 ends on such a high note, and chapter 9 falls into the deepest negative tone. This may very well have been Paul's design, making his readers feel the highs and lows even more dramatically. As we will soon discover, Paul starts Romans 9 with these words: "My heart is filled with bitter sorrow and unending grief for my Jewish brothers and sisters. I would be willing to be forever cursed, even cut off from

Christ, if that would save them.” But before we launch into Paul’s pit of despair, I want to set this up with a quick review of Romans 1 through 8 (volume 1 of this commentary) in order to provide continuity and ensure that the full context of Paul’s letter is maintained.

In chapter 1 of his letter, he presents Jesus as the Son of God and a descendant of King David. He claims that the Good News he is about to reveal is the “power of God to save all who believe, not just Jews but also Gentiles,” all of humanity. As was repeated many times in Volume 1, by *salvation*, Paul does not mean “saved from going to hell.” He never does in this or any of his 13 letters, even though he had many opportunities to do so if he believed it to be true.

Then, in Romans Two through the first half of 3, he presents the problem of humanity’s entanglement in sin (missing the mark in life), and all the judgments and consequences that come with it. He went into great detail, even providing a long list of sins common to all people, then exhorting his readers not to become judgmental since they all do the same kinds of things. He concludes his *problem* part of the letter with, “everyone has sinned and fallen short of God’s perfection.”

However, in verse 21 of Romans 3, Paul presents a huge, contrasting, turning point by using the words, “But now...” Here, he begins to offer a solution to the problem by revealing that Jesus, on the cross, freed humanity from their sins, allowing people to experience a good, right, and personal relationship with God through their faith. This is nothing short of revolutionary since no one had ever proposed such a concept of God acting in pure grace, doing everything Himself to save His world that He so loves!

Romans Four, then, was all about faith – the very thing that allows us to be in a right relationship with God and fully experience His love, forgiveness, and grace. He uses David and Abraham as examples to define what living by faith (and no

longer trying to keep the law of Moses) is all about. It is interesting to note that, except for the first part of chapter 5, this is the last time Paul mentions faith until Romans Ten. Why did he do this? Well, perhaps to get faith out of the way and fully explained, so that the essence of the solution found in Jesus alone can be fully trusted and understood as he provides an explanation for just about every aspect of the saving work of Jesus up through Romans 9, which we will soon dive into.

In Romans Five, Paul starts out with, “While we were still sinners, Christ died for us,” implying that we did nothing, and couldn’t do anything, to earn or add to our salvation, which was done completely for us by God through Jesus on the cross, presenting Jesus as the new head of the human race, replacing Adam. Then, in chapter 6, he tells his readers that Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised on our behalf, and even better, we were crucified, buried, and raised with him in some mysterious way, resulting in all of humanity someday being physically raised from the dead just as Jesus was.

But then in Romans Seven. Paul shifts gears and bears his soul about the inner conflict he has between his old and new natures, in spite of all the wonderful things he just wrote in chapters 5 and 6. He ends chapter 7 with, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” His answer is embodied in chapter 8, which may very well lie at the heart of the New Testament writings. He starts chapter 8 by stating that “there’s no condemnation in Christ,” then discusses those who live in the spirit and those who live in the flesh, noting how they live very differently.

The middle part of Chapter 8 is the only place in the New Testament I can think of that explains God’s purpose in creation. According to Paul, God subjected creation to *futility*, causing all creation to moan and groan. But He did so in hope (overwhelming confidence, in Greek) of something better, something absolutely amazing, whereby all humanity eventually

becomes free from sin and fully understands (and appreciates) what love, mercy, and grace are all about. Paul ends chapter 8, and the first half of his letter on the highest possible note. “Nothing can separate us from the love of God,” and he provides a lengthy list covering just about every imaginable possibility.

So I have concluded, after over fifty years of in-depth study of Jesus and the New Testament writings, that God does what He does in this life, subjecting all humanity to difficulty and struggle, pain and agony, sorrow and discomfort with a purpose and a view of bringing about something better, much better, for everyone. I wish it were not so, but somehow this was the best and only way to bring this about. Otherwise, God would have done it differently! God wanted all of us to end up in a much better place, experiencing many better things. If God had made people perfect, unable to exercise free choices, we would all forever be just wonderful little children that He would pat on the head and say, “I love you,” to which we could only answer, “I love you too, Father ... whatever that means!” How could we know what real love was without going through the great difficulty of our own doing and having God rescue us? We'd just be a bunch of robots, not knowing or understanding very much at all.

Perhaps this was what was behind God's declaration in the Garden of Eden, when He said, “When you choose to sin, your eyes will be open and will for the first time understand and experience good and evil.” Had we not all chosen to sin (not just Adam and Eve), we would never experience anything that could demonstrate to us what *love* is. God already knew what love was as well as what evil was. But He wanted us to know and understand by experiencing sin and salvation in order to make us better beings, much more like Himself! So now we're all ready to be redeemed, saved, and brought into becoming a *new creation* in Christ. For all eternity, we'll be so much better off. We'll look back and say, “That was really hard, but so well worth it. It wasn't worth it at the time, but now that I see the *end* that comes out of

the *means*, I'm so glad God created me and did everything the way He did according to His infinite wisdom!"

So now in Chapter 9, Paul shifts gears, big time. But please keep a couple of things in mind as we work through these next three unusual chapters (9-11). Paul is now going to deal with the question of, "What about Israel, the Jews?" He is basically writing to Gentiles (non-Jews) in Rome, although this letter is going to get circulated. But even the Gentiles are apt to ask, "What about those Jewish people, from whom Jesus was predicted and emerged as the long-awaited Messiah?" Most of the original followers of Jesus came from the Jewish religion, and now Gentiles are joining in, thanks to the missionary efforts of Paul and others throughout the known world of that day.

So it's a good question to answer, and it needs to be addressed. There are certain lessons that come out of answering this question. But also keep in mind that Paul has already answered all the basic questions about faith and salvation in chapters 4-8 of his letter. Therefore, 9-11 needs to always be seen with this in mind. Buckle up. We have a wild and crazy ride ahead. As a kid, my favorite ride at Disneyland was *Mr. Toad's Wild Ride*. I liked it because it involved many sudden and unexpected turns, jerking me around right and left. At 75, I don't think I would like it today. Oh, to be a kid again! I probably went on it ten times, then I took my kids back there when they were kids, and that ride was still there. So it's been around a long time. My hope is that Romans Nine will not jerk you around as much as *Mr. Toad's Wild Ride*.

A Heart Filled with Sorrow (9:1)

With Christ as my witness, I speak truthfully. My conscience and the Holy Spirit confirmed this. Paul's about to say something that he believes is really important. He brings a

much more serious tone than he did at the end of chapter 8. My heart is filled with sorrow and unending grief for my Jewish brothers and sisters. I am willing to be cursed, even cut off from Christ, if that would save them. Now, this word *cursed* doesn't mean, "I'll put a curse on you," like some kind of voodoo. It just means to set something apart, call attention to it, or consecrate it in some way before God. But it has a negative aspect to it, claiming that the thing *cursed* is unfit and in need of attention. It's cursed in that it is for God to deal with. And often it's used in a sense that something needs to be destroyed or some kind of destruction needs to happen.

Now, I believe God never does any destruction except the good kind that gets rid of the junk in us and in other people. Or, He may bring a *degree* of destruction, or even sometimes death. His good purposes are many. It might be a warning for people observing, and a correction for people being "cursed." With God, it's never *against* people; it's always *for* everyone who's involved with Him. He never does things capriciously or without a good purpose in mind. He never does anything in pure retaliation, with no corrective purpose whatsoever, just to get back at people in some kind of meaningless revenge. That's what people do! And so some people develop a view of God that's really just a view of their flawed selves that they impose back on God. Their motive is that they want God to retaliate against those *dirty rotten sinners* out there who have it coming to them. But that is not who God is. He is a savior, one who is dead set on redeeming and restoring those who are lost in sin. As sinners, we want God to do something about all that sin out there going on in this life. Well, He will! He's going to do something about all of them. He's going to save them, every last one. This is God's goal and exactly why Jesus came into this fallen world: to save it. That's what saviors do; they save.

So, Paul's heart is filled with sorrow and unending grief for his fellow Jews and is even willing to be *cursed* and cut off from

Christ if that would save them. Of course, it can't, but his sentiment is very human, genuine, and heartfelt. There are people who read this and say, "Oh, Paul was willing to go to hell, and be forever lost so that the other people could be saved from such a fate. I believed this once because it was what I was taught as a kid, reinforced in me as a young adult. But I also used to scratch my head and think, *Are you kidding me?* Even as a young child, at about 8 years old, when I first heard about hell in the Baptist church I was raised in, I remember thinking two very distinct thoughts. One was that sending people to hell did not seem like something God would do under any circumstances. The other was that I secretly hoped that somehow my parents were wrong and God would save everyone. I look back and realize these were rather profound thoughts for a young kid, but thoughts that were totally intuitive and somehow inherent in my soul because they did not come from anywhere within the church I was in! I do not remember pondering this very long, and I probably shook it off and went back outside to play. But I never forgot them. There was something very natural about it. I believe God was planting seeds of truth in my young mind that, fifty years later, would take root through many years of study and blossom into a beautiful view of a God who so loves me and His world.

The chosen people of Israel (9:4)

They are the people of Israel, chosen to be God's adopted children. The Jews are reported to have had a special relationship with God because they were the nation that He raised up through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to bring a promised Messiah who would be the savior of the world. And that seemed to be the real purpose God had for the Jews, not just to set up a set of laws so that people could all live under them. This is why Paul so often contrasts law and grace, because God's ultimate goal (in spite of any laws) was to bring a Messiah, bring Jesus through the lineage

of one of the tribes of Israel to save his people (and all humanity) from the intense burden of sin. And so, in that way, as one group out of all humanity, the Jews were people “chosen to be God's adopted children.” They were very special. They were adopted by Him for a particular purpose. That doesn't mean other people aren't important. Everyone is equally important to God, but He had a special mission for this chosen group of people.

God revealed His glory to them. He made covenants with them and gave them His law. The covenants were given through Abraham and others, all the way back to Adam and Eve. God has always had a plan for Jesus to come into the world and be the savior of it. So God made agreements (covenants) with various individuals, like Noah, Abraham, and David, foretelling the coming of Jesus as the promised Messiah. You may recall how God took Abram (before he was renamed to Abraham) outside at night and said, “Look at all those stars in the sky. That's how many descendants you will have.” But, of course, God was referring to his *spiritual* descendants who would someday be saved by Jesus, who was Abraham's true, single descendant, through whom God would bless all humanity by saving them from the horrors of sin.

Keep in mind that Abram could see stars much better than we can today, using just the naked eye, not having all the pollution and lighting that diminishes our view. He could easily see the hazy stretch of the Milky Way and countless stars in every direction. It had to be an overwhelming sight, maybe even causing him to doubt if any one man could have that many descendants. But the point God was making to Abram was that the number of people who would be blessed by Jesus (who would someday come from him) would be as countless as the stars and, therefore, would include everyone who would ever live and walk this earth in the future.

So, God made covenants with Israel, and then He gave them a set of laws to obey, including the now-famous Ten Commandments. Was the giving of the law God's ultimate intention for anyone (Jew or Gentile)? Is it possible that God was effectively saying, "Okay, you want laws, you want sacrifices? If that is what is in your hearts, I will give you all that and more. It will be a great learning experience and an amazing contrast someday when I bring the Good News message through my Son." I can't find any place in the Old Testament, prior to the giving of the law through Moses, where God ever told anybody to sacrifice anything. It appears that this is something they instinctively chose to do on their own. They would make some kind of rock monument and do some kind of sacrifice, or just let it stand as a sign of their dedication to God. But why do this if God had not commanded them to do such a thing?

It seems like God just wanted to have a close relationship with His creation ever since the Garden of Eden, and the only reason humans were distant from God (and felt the need to appease Him in some way) was because they ran away from Him. God never left them in any way, even when He kicked them out of the Garden. He went with them, knowing what good purpose He had in store for them. But because they all came out of paganism, including Abraham, they instinctively believed they needed to *appease* God (the gods) in some way. This is what guilt does to people. And unfortunately, a lot of people still have that in their minds, today, thinking, "We have to appease God. He's angry. He's on the verge of retaliating against everyone, so we'd better shape up, or else!" But these are all fear-based responses. To some degree, it *can* keep people from sinning. That was the effect on me as a young person growing up in a Baptist church, so it is not all bad.

But God wants something better, far better for everyone. He wants us to respond to His love, engage with Him in the most personal and secure way possible. Yet so many people are

convinced that it is all about behaving and believing correctly in order to earn some favor with God, preventing Him from doing something horrible to them for all eternity! But when we see and understand God for who He is, that He loves His world, and always wants to act in the very best interest of every human being, it changes everything in our thinking. This is God's goal. And yes, sometimes He has to act sternly or discipline us in some way, but only because He loves us and to do anything less would be a dereliction of duty by Him as the ultimate parent!

God gave them the privilege of worshipping Him and receiving His wonderful promises. God gave Israel countless good promises, most of which were for all humanity. But after over 50 years of reading and studying the Old Testament, it seems to be a *conflicted view of God*. It is hard for me to avoid such a conclusion when I read it as honestly as I can, which I believe honors God. He knows exactly what the Old Testament writings are, whether perfect or something less, and all we can do is draw honest conclusions. All kinds of horrible things are directly said about and attributed to God, things Jesus would never be a part of. This is very hard to escape. But there are also some very wonderful views of God, in Isaiah, Psalms, and other books that present God as possessing the highest moral excellence. Jesus quoted mostly from the Psalms and Isaiah and never quoted from the *historical* books (Joshua through Esther), nor from Job or Proverbs! Perhaps because of all the violence in them, he ignored them and only made reference to them a few times. But when he wanted to talk about himself and who he was, he quoted Psalms, Isaiah, and other prophetic books. It seems that the main purpose of the Old Testament, though it's full of all kinds of laws, stories, and events, was to predict, prepare the way for, and announce the coming of the Messiah, who would bring a new and better Covenant (agreement) with humanity. He alone is the one who brings salvation to the whole world.

You will never find Jesus saying to the multitudes, “Open your Old Testament to the book of First Samuel. I’m going to do a series of sermons, word for word from the text, explaining what is meant when God told Samuel to tell Saul to have His army kill all the Amalekites, everything that breathes, including women and children.” Jesus never taught in this way, though many modern-day preachers do. And, this is what I was taught to do in seminary.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are ancestors of the Jews, and Christ himself was an Israelite (as far as his human nature is concerned). He is the one who rules over everything, blessed by God forever, Amen. Paul is pointing to the Jews and saying that they are very special people. He loves them, cares about them, and is one of them. He would even give himself for them, which is a very self-sacrificing kind of love, the same kind of love he saw in Jesus.

Some have concluded from this passage that Paul is identifying Jesus as God. But the correct interpretation is disputed, and it seems it could go either way. It is possible that Paul is drawing this conclusion about Jesus, but he never states this so directly anywhere else in his letters. The closest is in his letter to the Colossians (chapter 1) where he describes Jesus in the most highly exalted terms possible, even saying that “the fullness of deity dwells in him.” Another place is in chapter 2 of his letter to the Philippians, where he possibly identifies Jesus as “equal to God.” But both of these passages have questions as to what degree Paul sees Jesus as fully equal with the Father in every way. (See my commentaries on Colossians and Philippians for greater detail).

2. God Gets to Choose (Romans 9:6-18)

True Israel (9:6)

At this point in Romans 9, Paul's discussion about the Jews becomes very interesting, building up into what is probably the most controversial passage in all of the New Testament, where he contrasts God loving Jacob and hating Esau in verse 13. Paul now uses yet another one of his "What shall we say then?" introductions to verse six. *What shall we say then? Has God failed to fulfill His promise to Israel?* I think Paul's just saying, "I want them to be saved (delivered) from their self-inflicted bondage of sin, living under the extreme demands of the law, which makes the problem worse." Since they remain in this miserable condition, Paul logically asks if God has somehow failed to fulfill His many promises in the Old Testament writings to deliver them into freedom. They're obviously in dire straits, and they're being destroyed in many different ways, and he just wants to help deliver them and save them from it. But how can he possibly do this? With words alone? Paul was not that naïve. But what he knew was that the Good News message was very powerful in delivering people from sin, law, and bondage. He, himself, was a prime example, and he wants them to know where the solution lies: only in Jesus as the promised Messiah and savior.

Paul asks this important question hot on the heels of telling them in verse 4 above that God "gave them the privilege of

receiving His promises to them.” So where is God’s fulfillment of His promises, Paul rightly asks. Has He failed in some way? As always, Paul answers all of his rhetorical questions with a big “No!”

No! Because not everyone who is born into the nation of Israel is truly a member of God's people. Wow. That’s his answer: that some are not really God’s people, do not receive God’s promises, and therefore He has failed some of them? His emphatic “No!” at the beginning of his answer prevents such a conclusion. They are all members of the nation Israel, but only some are in a special relationship with God, fully experiencing all that He intends for all humanity.

God’s ultimate fulfillment of His promises is not just to a race of people, Israel, the Jewish people. God, for sure, had a purpose in choosing that particular race of people, through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in particular, to bring a Messiah. But God’s promise wasn't just for them. It's much greater. Look what He said to Abraham: “Your descendants will be like the stars of the heavens, and it will include all the nations of the earth.” It turns out that God’s promise was to Abram and his *seed* (offspring, a single descendant), which turned out to be Jesus. Paul explains this in detail in his letter to the Galatians (see my commentary titled *Never Going Back!* for details.) It is through Christ that all the nations of the earth will be blessed.

So, in a way, the Good News message was going out at the very beginning, with Abraham. As God talked to him, he probably didn't fully understand everything God was telling him. But isn’t this true of us today? We certainly don’t understand everything God tells us, and we often just have to trust Him and know that He knows, and then find peace in that. Abram did the same thing. He thought, “Well, let's see. I'm going to be the father of many nations. How many? Hmmm... I wonder how many wives I will need and how many kids I’m gonna have?” Of course,

he wasn't thinking in *spiritual* terms. God was way ahead of him and did not explain everything to him, requiring him to trust God completely. This is why Abraham is seen as a man of such great faith, as Paul described Him back in Romans Four.

So, Paul writes, “Not all who were born into the nation of Israel (Jews), are truly members of God's people.” Some of them are, some of them aren't, but all will be recipients of God's promise to Abram to save the whole world. Probably, Paul is referring to how some of them are *members*, in that they know God and walk with him daily down the road of life, experiencing all His goodness in a life of peace and freedom from both sin and the law. By the time Paul wrote this letter to the Romans, there were a lot of Jews who were following Jesus, but also many more who were not. But thanks to Paul and others who took the Good News message out into the known world of that day, many Gentiles began to follow Jesus and experienced a changed life, becoming true “members of God's people.”

So now the new identity of God's people is: those who have faith and believe the Good News about God saving His world. It's a new identity. And when we get to Chapter 11, this will become very interesting because Paul presents an illustration of Israel as a tree that is pruned, so that Gentile branches can be grafted in.

Choosing with a Purpose (9:7)

Being descendants of Abraham doesn't make them truly Abraham's children. No, it doesn't, because being a true *descendant* of Abraham is a spiritual matter. Sure, they are all physical descendants of Abraham; they claim him as their “father,” mention him often, and always say how great he was. They are of the same race and maybe even a lineage they can trace back to him, but ultimately, in the way that really matters, they're not all true, *spiritual* children of Abraham.

For the scripture says, (the writings, or the Old Testament says), “Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted,” even though Abraham had other children, too. So Isaac was the chosen one by God, just as Abraham was, and then also Jacob, Isaac’s son. This was the chosen lineage through whom the Christ (Messiah) would come. David, who took another man’s wife and had him killed, was also in this same lineage. Even a harlot named Rahab was included. Is there any question that God is not a bigot and includes all kinds of people in His plan, not just *royalty* who put on a good show covering up their sin? Jesus has kind of a checkered past in his lineage.

This means that Abraham's physical descendants are not necessarily the children of God. That is Paul’s concluding statement on all of this. Any and all of them *can* be, and someday they all *will* be, but in Paul’s day, most were only physical descendants and had not yet become part of the all-inclusive spiritual identity that is only found in Jesus. *Only the children of the promise are considered to be Abraham's children. For God had promised: “I will return about this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” This son was our ancestor, Isaac.* Do you remember that story? God told Abraham that he would have a son, even though he and Sara (his wife) were advanced in years, far past the normal child-bearing age. Abraham might have thought, “Okay, Isaac's going to have a son, and he'll be the promised Messiah. No, it took a lot longer than that. It was about two thousand years before Jesus finally arrived on the scene.

Then, after Isaac married Rebecca, she gave birth to twins. Now the plot thickens! Things are going to get a little strange, so buckle up. When Isaac married Rebecca, she gave birth to twins, Jacob and Esau. Perhaps you remember the story

about the porridge? But before these twins were born, before they had done anything good or bad, she received a message from God. (This message shows that God chooses people according to His own purpose.) God does everything according to His own good purpose, not according to His own whims, never capriciously or accidentally. There is always a purpose in everything God does, and it is always for good, to bring about the very best for all people and all of His creation. Can He ever, possibly, do anything less and still be God? The good choices God makes do not depend on our doing good or bad (both of which we all do). He chooses certain people to do certain things, and it all fits into the master plan He had before He created the world. This master plan always centers around and focuses on Christ!

God calls people, but not according to their good or bad works. Rebecca was told, "Your older son will serve the younger son." The Old Testament writings put it this way: "I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau." Some translations (like the 1611 King James version) word it this way: "Jacob I loved and Esau I hated." These words have been the basis of controversy and weaponization for centuries. It presents God as one who loves some people (favorites) and hates others. But this is contrary to everything else we know about God from Jesus, Paul, and the other New Testament writers. God is always presented as one who loves, does so unconditionally, extending grace to all mankind, desiring all to be saved, and sending His Son into this world to save it and not condemn it (as John declares in his never-quoted verse 3:17 of his Gospel).

A better translation is "Esau, I have rejected." This sets up a contrast between acceptance and rejection rather than love and hate. Plus, the word in Greek, often translated as *hate*, is really "to love less." For example, Jesus once told his followers they needed

to *hate* their father and mother if they wanted to follow him. But here, as in this passage by Paul, Jesus is just saying that his followers must love him more (and love their parents less) in order to follow him; otherwise, their interests will be divided, and devotion to him will be lacking in some way.

As we shall soon discover in this passage, Paul will demonstrate that God's choosing one over another (love more or less, accept vs reject) is not about God's ultimate or final attitude toward an individual person. He loves everyone infinitely and therefore the same. Such choices by God are for ultimate good, and in this case, He is choosing one person over another to play a different role of one serving the other, to accomplish God's ultimate goal of saving all humanity (not choosing some over others as is often claimed by many religious people today).

So, if we go back and read the Old Testament account, these twins were born with one grabbing the heel of the other. Jacob, the second-born, was grabbing the heel of Esau, the first-born. Later in life, Jacob deceived Esau out of his firstborn birthright, taking advantage of him when he was famished, and offered a bowl of porridge in exchange. So one baby comes out, grabbing the heel of the other, obviously not on purpose, but it was symbolic of what would happen someday in their future. For them, God's prediction to Sara that the older son would serve the younger came true. Esau only beat him by 20 seconds coming out of the womb, and was officially the *firstborn*, but these roles got reversed by God, allowing the younger to take advantage of the older son, having a purpose in this reversal.

A Hardened Heart (9:14)

Paul is very aware that what he wrote was something quite controversial, appearing to be very unfair. So, he asks in verse 14, *Are we saying, then, that God was unfair?* And then he answers his own questions in the usual way. *Of course not!* He is

categorically saying that what God did (allowed?) was not an unfair act. He goes on to explain by using Moses as an example. *For God said to Moses, "I will show mercy to anyone I choose, and I will show compassion to anyone I choose."* Notice that He only mentions mercy and compassion, which are positive things. What He doesn't say is, "I will show mercy and compassion to whom I want, and will condemn anyone to hell that I want." He just talks about mercy and compassion as things that God chooses to bestow on people, in any situation He wants, for whatever purpose He has. We already know God is a merciful God, that He shows compassion; that's His goal, and He will never forsake anyone. But in certain situations, God can selectively show mercy and compassion in a special way to one person and not to another, to meet His purpose and maybe teach a lesson to the people involved or those who were observing.

Now, Paul will draw a conclusion on all of this. It is *God who decides to show mercy. We can neither choose it nor work for it.* Because mercy is something God does, and is something we can't earn in any way, it is His alone to administer, and He always does so justly and for the overall good. We can't choose it. We can't talk Him into it. It's something He chooses to do, and He does it abundantly. But He does it, sometimes, selectively, to meet a special purpose.

This passage is a good example of something I have learned over my past 53 years of careful, in-depth study. When it comes to reading the New Testament (or any historical document), let it say everything it's saying and don't suppress it in any way. But on the other hand, and equally important, don't make it say things it's not saying!. The tendency among people (myself included) is to read something and not understand it because it's a bit unclear, and there's no commentary that provides an absolute explanation. And so, what do we all tend to do? Everybody and their brother

comes up with a commentary where they're going to explain how it all works. Right? Hey, you are reading one now! Commentaries tend to add things (why else write one?), supposedly bringing what they think is true and explaining what the original author intended. They're all entitled to do this, but just keep in mind that in doing so, they are wise to just let it say everything it says, even if it is uncomfortable and not what is desired or expected based on preconceived ideas. The key is not to make it say something it doesn't say or put words in the original writer's mouth. I am sure I am as guilty of this as any commentator. It is hard to see one's own bias and prejudice. But any decent, objective, fair-minded commentator will admit this and try to present ideas as honestly as possible. This is my goal, yet I must caution you to never blindly trust any commentator or teacher. Do your own homework, and take everything to God for His perfect explanation. This must be done repeatedly in life to ensure that you have not become self-deceived. But God is faithful, and when we keep on seeking Him, endlessly, He will not fail us and will show us the truth we need to know, all in His time!

Okay, the plot gets even thicker. *The scriptures say that God told Pharaoh, "I have appointed you for the very purpose of displaying my power in you and to spread my fame throughout the earth."* Now, this isn't God being self-centered and saying, "Man, oh man, I'm gonna show everybody how big and awesome I am." He's not like that. For the sake of people and for the sake of saving the world, He wants His power to be known, who He is, how mighty, awesome, and good He is, and what a wonderful and successful savior He is. He wants everybody to know that, and He'll accomplish this through whatever means are necessary, even if it appears unfair or harsh. Rest assured that whenever God acts in a way that could be interpreted as unfair or selfish ... it isn't. It's usually on the backs of somebody doing something wrong, and He's getting involved

with a good purpose and pure motives, as a result of His love. Love is the great and ultimate motive behind everything God does. Remember, love is not just good and affectionate feelings; it is acting in the very best interest of the one who is loved, even at the expense, pain, and loss of the one who is loving. Jesus on the cross is the supreme example of real, self-giving, unconditional love. It is what everyone needs and longs for in life.

Paul continues, *So you can see how God chooses to show mercy to some, and chooses to harden the heart of others so they'll refuse to listen.* Wait a minute. That sounds pretty mean ... hardening their hearts so they will refuse to listen? If you go back and read the story of Pharaoh, you'll find that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first. He's the one who stepped out and decided he was going to resist God, and then God basically said, "Okay, you want to harden your heart against me? I'll help you, but not in some kind of immature retaliation, but instead for the purpose of bringing your problem to a full conclusion. Let's see where this goes. For your sake, Pharaoh, for the sake of Israel, and for the sake of establishing a record about what I'm doing and why, I'm going to bring to full fruition what you already have in your heart." Pharaoh wasn't a guy saying, "Oh God, I repent. Please forgive me. I love you, God," with God then responding in a way to make him worse, in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose whatsoever! There are many who want to present God in that way, but it just does not fit who He is or who He must be in His *holiness* (which means to be "set apart" from all evil, foolishness, petty grievances, and failure). God hardened Pharaoh's heart, forcing him to experience all the results of choosing such foolish action in the first place. As we saw in the middle of Romans Eight, God subjects all creation to futility (even hardening the hearts of those who first choose to harden it) with the goal of bringing about a better outcome that could not be gained any other way.

3. Questioning God (Romans 9:19-33)

Arguing with God (9:19)

Paul's monitoring himself here as he writes. He knows what provocative things he's writing. He states what some readers could easily conclude based on what he just said. *Well then, some might say, "Why does God blame people for not responding? Haven't they simply done what He makes them do?"* That's a reasonable question. Can you see where, after what he just said, a person could logically draw that conclusion? Gee, if God's gonna harden someone's heart, how can you blame them for having a hardened heart? He's the one who caused it, right? That makes sense. So, Paul's asking the question, "Haven't they simply done what He makes them do?" Well, here's Paul's answer. It's a very interesting answer that can be taken in many different ways. But, as always in my commentaries, I want to point out what it *doesn't* say and what it *does* say. This passage does not need to say more than it does just because somebody wants it to. I've seen people load up their spiritual oozy so they can mow people down with the weaponization of this verse.

Here is Paul's answer to his own question. *No, you should not conclude that. After all, who are we as mere humans before God to argue against His choices? Should a creature*

created by God say back to Him, "Why have you made me like this?" God makes different people in different ways and to do different things. He lets some people have a stronger disposition to disobey, and maybe even gives them more freedom of will to do so. Some people have the temperament to go after things until they get themselves in trouble. That seems to be the only thing that stops them. I've seen people like that. It's not that God created them to be bad. He just made them very capable and sometimes very smart. He makes some with great abilities, and they end up using those abilities worse than an average person who doesn't have such abilities. Do you see? God makes everybody different with a purpose for them to fit perfectly into His master plan. People who really go after things, God desires for them to do great things in life, not horrible things, but they often make bad decisions, and Pharaoh was this kind of leader. He didn't become a leader by accident. He was a tenacious, driven, egomaniacal type of a guy, just like we have today in politics. Look at what kind of person runs for president. Certainly not your average Joe or Jill. Nobody in their right mind takes this on, except a certain kind of person.

So, when we ask, "Why does God blame people for not responding correctly? Haven't they simply done what He made them do and be?" Paul says, "No, don't say that. Who are you? A mere human, to argue with God? Should the thing that was created say to the one who created it, 'Why have you made me like this?'" Look at this illustration that Paul takes from the Old Testament. *When a Potter makes jars out of clay, doesn't He have the right to use the same lump of clay to make one jar for decoration and the other to throw garbage into?* Some translations use the words *for common use*. But either way, Paul is making a pretty harsh statement. I think he is trying to demonstrate the absolute prerogative that God has as a Creator. No one can really argue with this if they believe in God. The

obvious problem is we immediately think, “Gee wiz, God makes some people for good use and others for common use (at best), or to throw garbage in (worst), yielding them rather worthless.” Who wants to play that role in life? Seems worthless. Well, even a common or garbage pot might not be worthless because it still serves a function in some greater scheme. If God makes a pot to collect garbage, it doesn't mean the pot itself is garbage. It serves its function and plays its role as intended by its creator. Disposing of garbage might end up being the most important role in life, much higher in accomplishment than a pot designed as decoration! It is the sole decision of the designer, and if the designer is a good and wise one, then what He designs is ultimately good. Can't this be true of people as well as pots? It can be, in God's economy, and in the way He wisely runs His world to bring about the very best for everyone. Some roles in life are not glamorous, but if they are accomplishing what the Creator intended, then it is good!

This is, perhaps, what Paul is getting at here in this passage. He goes on and writes, *In the same way, even though God has the right to show His anger and His power, He is very patient with those on whom His anger falls.* With God, there is always mercy, compassion, patience, and so many other good things involved in everything He does. Always look for it, and you will find it. Perhaps you can already see how some religious people can easily *weaponize* a passage like this in order to instill fear in people with the goal of controlling them in some way. It starts turning God into a real moral monster, right?

Yes, there are those who disobey God and who deliberately rebel against Him, and yet Paul says God is patient with them! This would be yet another great opportunity for Paul to warn rebellious people about going to hell, but he doesn't; he never does in any of his letters. Why not? It's because he does not believe such horrible, out-of-character things about God.

Even though God has the right to show His anger and His power, His anger is always justified and a good thing. There would be something wrong with God if He did not get angry about sin. That is the proper response of one who loves others and sees them doing things that are self-destructive. Didn't we become angry when our children, whom we love so much, did things that are foolish, self-destructive, and put their lives or well-being in danger? God is no different, except He expresses His anger perfectly, not too much and not too little in any situation (unlike us). I'm glad God gets angry about things. I'm glad He's not just a complacent God that says, "Oh, go ahead, whatever." He is always angry in a good way. He's angry about bad things, and He wants to make them right.

So, He has the right to show His power and be angry. It's never a matter of, "Hey, look at this. Watch me exercise my power, you puny little human beings. Are you scared yet? You need to be!" God is not like that. He shows His power so that we'll know that He's the great, wonderful God that we can put our trust in.

Destined for Destruction? (9:22b)

After Paul writes, "God is very patient with those on whom His anger falls," then he adds, *They are destined for destruction*. Now we gotta be careful with the word *destined*. Are they destined? Of course. Everything is, in that God knows ahead of time everything that will happen, including the free-willed action of humans. All things that happen must happen, or God would be wrong about what He knows. But does this mean God destines people to go to hell and be destroyed forever? Or, are they destined *because* of what they do, the way they choose to live, and the way their sinful heart is bent? Their choices *determine* certain outcomes, and God's foreknowledge of all things guarantees that these will come to pass. They are destined, so to

speak, as long as they stay in that state of sin and rebellion that all of us are all too familiar with. Destruction of some kind is always their fate, but it is a natural result of their poor choices, not some additional punishment God is heaping on them in retaliation. Quite the opposite! It is this very cycle of poor choices resulting in destruction that God, in His infinite love, has come to save us from!

Now, this word *destruction* is yet another word that, for some people, means “to go to hell, forever.” But this word, in Greek (the original language of the New Testament), in and of itself, only means “to destroy, tear down, or disable in some way.” It can be used by a writer to mean more than that, but like all words in all languages, words take on meanings by how they are used with other words, in context. A word like destruction can mean destruction in this life, it can mean the destruction of one’s reputation, or it can be the destruction that comes from death. It can even be used to refer to the destruction of punishment or correction in eternity in some way. But other words added by the author would need to be present to give it such meaning. I have never found any unambiguous example in the New Testament where the word *destruction* means “never-ending torment.” Now, some people will read this into this word because they have been taught to do so, but this happens apart from fully considering the context of other words in which this word, destruction, is found. I have found that words such as destroy, punish, curse, judgment, justice, perish, and many more never require me to draw a conclusion that God ever acts in never-ending torment, abandoning all corrective measures in any person’s life. We can stop at some point and conclude that God works in people’s lives, sometimes very severely, but always with patience and according to some ultimately good purpose.

Paul now gives a huge conclusion on all that he has said previously. This may very well be the key to all he is trying to

convey in Romans Nine. *God does this to make the riches of His glory shine even brighter on those to whom He shows mercy, who were prepared in advance for glory.* Based on what Paul wrote in Romans 8 when he said that “all who were known by God end up glorified by Him also,” never losing anyone along the way, I believe *everyone* was prepared in advance for glory, and someday we'll get there. But they may be struggling right now, in this life. Don't we all to some degree? *And we are among those whom He selected from the Jews and from the Gentiles.* For sure, Paul is saying that God selects people from among all humanity (Jews and Gentiles). But in what way? Certainly, it is not to choose some to be eternally saved and others (most of humanity?) to be eternally lost, as many religious people today are taught to believe. Is that possible? Well, considering the fact that anything is possible from a limited, human point of view ... yes. But is it likely, in light of all we know about God from Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers? This brings a much different realization, especially considering that Paul never warns anyone about going to hell and being tormented by God forever.

It is easy to see how passages like this can lend themselves to the idea that God is some kind of vengeful, retaliating being to be feared in the most extreme ways, requiring mankind to grovel at His feet, hoping to show how sorry they are for sinning and struggling with unbelief. This is the polar opposite of seeing God as a loving Savior who fully understands the temptations and struggles of His creatures that He so loves, only wanting to redeem and restore them from their lost state, and is determined to do so without ever failing.

Some people have told me that God can do whatever He wants, as if I am somehow preventing Him from doing so by my *belief* that He doesn't. My answer to them is always the same: “Of course He can; He's God. And I believe whatever He wants is right, no matter what I think about it.” But I also tell them that

what God wants is always good, loving, kind, and the best final outcome for everyone. These are the kinds of desires God has, and therefore, what He wants. How could He ever want anything less and still be God?

The great rock of stumbling (9:25)

Remember, in this whole section of Romans 9-11, Paul is dealing with the Jews. He is answering his own question, “What about the nation of Israel, and how do they fit into God’s salvation? *Concerning the Gentiles, God says in the prophecy of Hosea, “Those who were not my people, I will now call them ‘my people,’ and I will love those whom I did not love before.”* Of course, God loved them before. But as they come to God, they will *experience* it as never before. So, from their point of view, they have become those whom God now loves (in comparison). Jesus told his disciples that they must hate their mother and father to follow him. Well, obviously, he’s not saying, “Hey, follow me and go hate your mom and dad.” He’s using hyperbole to make a point. We do this today all the time. We never mean the extremes we speak about, but people understand the point we are making. The Gentiles were “not God’s people” in that they were not actively experiencing a relationship with Him, even though they were unknowingly loved completely by God. And so when God begins to call them His people, it is because it is a new experience for them. God never changes; only people change, for better or worse. Also, the Gentiles were not part of God’s plan to bring a Messiah. So in that way, they were certainly not His people, fulfilling that purpose. The Jews were doing that. But now with this new covenant and this Good News message, the Gentiles are brought in and included in God’s salvation. This is really gonna get shaped up in Chapter 11 when Paul talks about grafting

branches into a tree symbolic of Israel. God is making one group of people from Jews and Gentiles.

At the same place where they were told, "You are not my people," there they will be called "children of the Living God." Concerning Israel, the Prophet Isaiah cried out, "Though the people of Israel are numerous as the sand of the seashore, only a remnant will be saved." Remember, the word *saved* does not mean "saved from hell." It could mean that, but the author would have to use other words to make such a meaning clear, and Paul does not. *Saved* means "delivered," and the Jews were in need of deliverance from the rebellious state in which they lived. It means being delivered from their difficulties and struggles and needing to become a group of people who follow God, and in this case, follow Christ under the New Covenant. Until God completes His plan to save Jews and Gentiles alike someday, the Jews who respond rightly to God are small in number, even though their total number is huge.

"The Lord will carry out His sentence upon the Earth quickly and with finality." Isaiah said the same thing on another occasion: "If the Lord of heaven's armies had not spared a few of our children, we would have been wiped out like Sodom and destroyed like Gomorrah." Salvation and deliverance come from God. He's the one who brings it. Paul then asks, What does this all mean? Even though the Gentiles were not trying to follow God's standards, they were made right with God. It was not automatically *all* Gentiles that were "made right with God." But they began to come in and be part of the community of believers alongside the few believing Jews. When Paul writes this letter to the church at Rome, it is a whole generation after Jesus was crucified on the cross. Paul's writing

from that perspective. So even though the Gentiles were not trying to follow God's standards, they were made right with God by the Gospel (Good News) going out, people learning of it, and responding with, "Oh yeah, I want to follow Jesus."

It was by faith that this took place. The Gentiles believed; they accepted the message. But the people of Israel who tried so hard to get right with God by keeping the law never succeeded. So, Paul's contrasting the Jews' response with that of the Gentiles. He's essentially saying, "Hey, the Israelites who brought the Messiah, had the Old Testament, and were the people of God, they were trying so hard to keep the law that they missed the main point of how God was working. Yet, these Gentiles who don't know anything about law and weren't God's people started flocking in like crazy. They understood the Good News message and wanted to get in on this salvation that Jesus brought by the cross." So the people of Israel never succeeded. Obviously, some of them did since the earliest Christians were Jews, but they were relatively few, and most didn't respond to their own Messiah who came.

Paul now asks, *Why didn't they succeed? Because they were trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of trusting Him.* The bottom line is that they're trying to get themselves into a right relationship with God by keeping the law and doing good works, when only faith in Jesus can accomplish all this; it's the only path to God! They were doing the old "appeasing the gods" routine that's been around forever in humanity and is still alive and well today, sometimes even in Christian churches! "I gotta please God, or He's gonna do something horrible to me," is their thinking. That's where most Jews were, and Paul's saying they're missing out by trying to get right with God by keeping the law instead of by trusting Him.

They stumbled over the Great Rock that was in their path, and of course, that's Jesus. Peter, in his first letter, called Jesus "the cornerstone that became a stumbling block to the Jews." God warned them of this in the Old Testament when He said, "I'm placing a stone in Jerusalem that makes people stumble – a rock that makes them fall. But anyone who trusts in him will never be disgraced. God didn't place that cornerstone (Jesus) to cause everybody to stumble and fall and be destroyed. No, He put it in a place where they would run into it and fall (metaphorically), right in their capital, Jerusalem. It is ironic that Jerusalem means "city of peace." God's goal was not to destroy them, but to get their attention so they could turn to Him and be saved! Otherwise, disgrace becomes theirs.

That ends Romans Nine. Somehow, we got through it. It had a lot of interesting ideas about who God is and how He is working in the lives of Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles), which is all humanity! For some reason, Paul decided this was the best way for him to start this section of his letter. He chose to talk about God making sovereign choices, and how He can choose an older son to serve a younger one, contrasting Jews and Gentiles who are all targets of God's salvation, just in different ways. The Jews who already had it delivered to them by God, signed, sealed, and delivered right in front of them, rejected it. And the Gentiles who weren't even looking for it said, "We're in!" It has always been a mystery to me (and I'm sure most people who study the New Testament) as to why the Jews so strongly rejected something so good that was given to them by God's grace. My theory is that when people get too much of a good thing and are treated specially, it goes to their head, and the familiarity of it all works against them. Familiarity breeds indifference! How many people have I met in life who did not fully appreciate their spouse, simply

because they became commonplace and familiar? Many! Perhaps all of us, to some degree – me included.

4. Confessing and Believing (Romans 10:1-13)

Misdirected Zeal (10:1)

Somehow, we got through Romans 9, probably the most difficult and controversial chapter in the New Testament. But perhaps you took away from it the realization that there is always, at the core, God's goodness, mercy, and grace, even in times of judgment when God is working to bring people to Himself and save them, not condemn them! Additionally, perhaps you saw that God's choice in Jacob over Esau was not symbolic for God choosing to eternally save some people and send all others to hell forever, as many religious people today have concluded. Instead, Paul was pointing out that God has the right to make such choices (the older serving the younger, in opposition to social-traditional norms) to fit into His overall purpose in the salvation of all humanity, just as He had planned.

As we now dive into Romans Ten, Paul again shifts gears. He will, in Romans Eleven, get back to His theme of "What about the Jews?" which he also touches on in this chapter. Here in Romans Ten, Paul again discusses faith after avoiding it ever since the beginning of Romans Five and not mentioning it again until the last verse of Romans Nine, where he wrote: "Anyone who *trusts* in Him will never be disgraced." That avoidance of discussing faith in any way lasted for nearly five chapters. And why? My guess is that Paul thoroughly discussed faith in Romans

Four to get it out of the way so he could discuss the heart of the *solution* in Romans 5 through 9, which is that Jesus alone, apart from anything we do, including our faith, is how God saves us from the *problem*. Salvation is God's work on our behalf, by His grace, and faith is no more than our correct response to what God has already done. Fully engaging us with Him is a sweet and secure fellowship of love!

But now, Paul's going to talk about faith, how important it is in our spiritual lives, despite the fact that it never earns us anything with God in any way. It only gets us into a right relationship with God, as Paul has many times stated this throughout his letter, especially in Romans Four where he highlighted faith. So, as we work through Romans Ten (and the rest of this letter), keep in mind that salvation depends on Jesus and what he did. It doesn't depend on us in any way, not even our faith, which is otherwise a key element in our lives. As we will see here in Romans Ten, we can believe only after hearing the Good News message about Jesus and the cross, which delivers us from the entanglement of sin in this life when we trust God and walk with Him daily. No one perfectly does this, and so we often have to restore our relationship with God, but only on our end, since He will never leave us or abandon us in any way. God waits for us to turn back to Him, but He also works in us, which helps to bring this about. That is the life of faith we live, on and off, in and out, but always growing closer to God, who is always there for us no matter what!

Dear brothers and sisters, the longing of my heart and my prayer to God is for the people of Israel to be saved. That's also how Paul started out in Romans Nine. Remember, he said, he was willing to be cursed, to be declared unfit and unworthy, even cut off from Christ if that would save (deliver) his fellow Israelites from their destructive state of being. He was not saying he was willing to go to hell and be forever tormented, as some

people have concluded. Paul knew that God never acts in such a way and that He always has salvation, correction, and the restoration of all people on His mind and agenda. But, of course, it doesn't work that way with God. Paul is just expressing his honest, deep sentiment and love for his fellow Jewish people.

I know what enthusiasm they have for God. He sees this basically good trait in them, even though it is misguided as a result of their blindness as to who Jesus was: their long-awaited Messiah, who came to do something much greater than what they were looking for in a Messiah who would free them physically and politically. But this Messiah, Jesus, brought *spiritual* freedom that lasts forever and can never be taken away by any force in this material world. This is *true* freedom. Jesus once put it this way: "If the Son has set you free, you are free indeed!" Paul rightly assesses their condition as a whole race of people who are missing out on better things because they are so wrapped up in themselves, here and now, in this material world that is passing away. What a bad trade they have made, and many people today make the same bad trade. Real freedom is only found in the spiritual life, where "no thieves can steal and rust cannot destroy," in the words of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount, where he described what *heavenly treasure* is.

Sure, the Jews would say they were making it *all about God*, just as so many religious people do today. But they were really making it "all about *themselves*, making it all about God," just as so many people today do. I know because I, too, once indulged in this kind of deception, thinking I was so loyal and dedicated to God when really I was focused on myself in the name and appearance of worshipping God. I cannot judge anyone else, except to say this is what I learned about myself, and it would be hard to believe that I was the only one. How about you? Are you a person "making it all about yourself, making it all about God"

in some kind of self-deception? Perhaps not, and I hope not, but only you can sort this out with God.

Paul emphasizes this point in what he writes next: *I know what enthusiasm they have for God, but it is misdirected zeal.* They had zeal (as do many religious people today), but in the wrong direction; the wrong focus. Easy to do! *They don't understand God's way of making people right with Himself. Refusing to accept God's way, they cling to their own way of getting right with God by trying to keep the law.* This is a major theme throughout the New Testament, and especially for Paul: law versus grace. Law is trying to get right with God by keeping some set of requirements, or by doing enough good things to appease God and cause Him to love more and condemn less. But God's grace says, "No, I accept you no matter what; I love you unconditionally. And now, based on that, let me tell you what I've done for you in my Son, Jesus, so you can believe and then have a better life experiencing peace, joy, and security".

Christ has already accomplished for us any purpose for which the law was given. That's an interesting statement. The law was given to show us our need and to show us how sinful we are. However, ideally, if we keep the law, things will be much better in life for us. But what the law could never do is change our hearts so that we become a new creation, relating to God in the best way possible. Only Jesus could bring that about, and he did. Remember how Paul started out in Romans Eight? "God did what the law could not do. He sent His own Son into a body like the bodies we have as sinners. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving His Son as a sacrifice for our sins." So what the law could never do, Christ did for us. He kept the law. He made it all work for us because he had already accomplished the purpose for which the law was given.

As a result, all who believe in Jesus are made right with God. You can take this any way you want. In many modern translations, the word *justified* is used in place of “made right” with God. But Paul makes it clear that belief (faith) is what brings this about. Many today see faith as something we are required to do to earn some kind of acceptable status with God that prevents us from being eternally tormented (resulting from His wrath). All I can say is that if you believe that, make sure you believe, keep on believing, believe the right things, and even (according to James in his letter) believe in such a way that it results in good works, or else you will end up separated from God forever! But the other way to see this idea of *justification by faith* (being made right with God) is that there is nothing in our act of believing that earns us anything with God, whatsoever. Faith, then, becomes the means by which we enter into a right relationship with God who already loves us, has saved us, and wants us to have fellowship with Him forever. These are two very different, even opposite, views of the role that faith plays in our lives. One is basically *law*, working for our salvation (we must believe or we will go to hell forever), and the other is *grace*, where God is already good with all humanity, and has provided a way (faith) for us to experience what He has already accomplished for us in Jesus.

Think about it. When you believe, what happens is that you come into a right relationship with God, you are effectively *made right* with Him, and you haven't earned anything with God in the process. God doesn't say, “Oh, good, you finally believe. I'll like you now, and I won't have to do something horrible to you after you die!” Instead, He just says, “Welcome home! Hey, you figured it out, and I always knew you would because I was helping you each step along the way. Now that you believe, let's have a wonderful, personal, loving relationship forever!”

Faith's Way of Getting Right (10:5)

Moses wrote that the law's way of making a person right with God requires obedience to all of its commands. The law of Moses clearly taught that obeying its commands was the way to make a person right with God. Faith's way of getting right with God is this way: Don't ask yourself, "who will go up to heaven and bring Christ down to earth?" Faith understands that no one can go up into heaven somewhere to pull Christ down and make him come to earth. He came without anybody tugging on him. "God sent His Son into the world to save it and not condemn it." (according to John in his Gospel account). But faith also says this: *And don't ask yourself, "who will go down to the place of the dead to bring Christ back to life again?"* No one can do that either. That's a power belonging to God alone. Christ was raised from the dead outside of anything we could ever do. This is what makes salvation by God exclusively His work. All we can do is to say, "Thank you," and live a life demonstrating our appreciation and returning His love. What Christ did on the cross was a unique work done by a unique person in history. So, Paul concludes that we can neither bring Jesus down to save us, nor raise him up to bring us a resurrected life. It's all God's doing, on our behalf, and it has nothing to do with us keeping any law.

Paul further develops this idea. *In fact, what faith does say is, "The message is very close at hand; it is on your lips and in your heart."* Interesting. The message of the Good News about Jesus was already on the lips of the Jews as they read the Old Testament predictions about the promised Messiah who would come. It is even in their hearts as they pondered the words they read, but so poorly understood them. This is why they so needed Jesus, as their Messiah, to come, fulfill all their expectations (and more), and explain to them who God is and

what He wants. And that message is the very same message we now preach everywhere about trusting Jesus: If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. This verse is seen by many Christians today as a *transaction* that God is offering to every human being: that if they will do something (confess and believe), then God will do something in return (save them). Now, it is true that when we confess and believe, something good happens, in that we are saved (delivered) from our sins and enter into a new and wonderful relationship with our Creator. But that's a long way from the idea that we can earn our way out of having God send us to hell if we do not confess and believe!

Notice that Paul does not in this passage, or anywhere else in any of his letters, warn people about some kind of horrific action God will take against them if they fail to keep their end of a *transaction* set up by God. This would certainly be a great place to present such a warning if Paul believed such a horrible thing about God. But he doesn't. The big question here is, "Delivered (saved) from what?" That is all the word *saved* means in Greek: delivered. If not some kind of eternal torment or abandonment, then it can only be deliverance from some kind of bondage in this life. How about the bondage of sin? Salvation is always referred to in the New Testament as deliverance from sin, never from some kind of retaliation by God with no corrective purpose in His mind, now or in eternity.

Paul wrote elsewhere in his letters that someday "every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord." That is not God with His foot on people's throats forcing them to confess something against their will. In eternity, everyone will see clearly who God is, what *salvation by grace* means, and how foolish they were to ignore God's loving invitation to come to Him, through Jesus, and be free from guilt, shame, fear, and worry, from then on and forever. Sinners will be falling over each other

trying to get closer to God so they can thank Him for the salvation that they did not earn as a result of His great love for them. No force in the universe will be able to stop them from falling down on their knees and confessing the wonderful Lordship of Jesus, who saved them. Perhaps, without much hesitation, God will say to them, “Get up off your knees, come up here and give me a hug. Let me wrap my big arms around you and show you how much I love you and always have. My desire for you is to live securely and enjoyably in my presence, forever. Your time of testing and trials is over, and you have learned everything needed to be my precious child that I have redeemed.”

Paul continues his thinking: *For it is by believing in your heart that you are made right with God.* Notice that it’s not just what we say *outwardly* (confessing with our tongue), but what’s going on *inwardly* (believing in our heart) that makes us right with God. It’s not about meeting some requirement set up by God, a *transaction*. It is about realizing, for the first time, that God loves you and has done for you what only He can do through Jesus on the cross. Think about it. If, once you believe, you begin to enter into a right relationship with God, you have not earned your salvation in any way. You haven’t earned His favor, nor have you earned a ticket away from hell. You come into a right relationship with God by believing. How else could you? Well, you couldn’t. So belief does something wonderful. It just doesn’t earn anything because “it’s by believing in your heart that you’re made right with God.”

And it is by confessing with your mouth that you are saved. You are delivered from the entanglement of sin and delivered from sin itself and death. But you can see how people would take these verses and read into them the idea that if you believe in your heart and confess with your mouth, then you

won't go to hell; you'll go to heaven instead. It is easy to draw that conclusion if you already assume that's what God's going to do. But Paul didn't say that here in any way. He had a great opportunity, but he never mentions any kind of retribution, so why find in this passage what is not present? He only used the word saved, which means "delivered."

As Scripture tells us, anyone who trusts in Him will never be disgraced. Jew and Gentile are the same in this respect. They have the same Lord who gives generously to all who call upon Him. The fact that God gives generously to all who call upon Him (all humanity, Jew and Gentile) is what God is all about. He is not in the business of retaliation, but of correction, redeeming, and restoring. He is a God who saves, and that's why people come to Christ. He's generous, and those who call upon Him, obviously, they're going to engage with Him and enter into a relationship with Him. Have you already done this? For you to do so is God's greatest delight. He's always been there for you and always will be. You need only to put your trust in Him, realizing there is no one else to trust. And if you don't? He will still be there for you, and in fact, He will always be working in your life to draw you to Himself. Do you sense this? Have you seen God at work in your life in the past? Think it through, and you will begin to realize He's been there all along. And it goes further than that. There's going to be more blessings for you, more deliverance, and more salvation from the entanglement of sin. And so Paul concludes, *All who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.*

5. Faith Comes from Hearing (Romans 10:14-21)

Going, telling, hearing, believing (10:14)

Next, Paul writes, in the form of a long question, what is now a famous passage used in Christian evangelism, to motivate/encourage Christians to get the Good News message out wherever they are. *But how can they call upon Him to save them unless they believe in Him?* This is the first part of Paul's long question, and it's a good one. This is a point I have tried to make in all of my commentaries. No one can come into a right relationship with God (be *made right* with Him, or become *justified*) short of believing in God, prompting them to call upon Him to save them from their sin, failure, disadvantage, discouragement, and loneliness. Here is part two of Paul's question. *And how can they believe if they've never heard about him?* Another good question. For most people, they are so lost and apart from God that they must be exposed to this wonderful Good News message in some way before even considering turning to God. However, never underestimate how God can work in people's lives, directly or indirectly. Luke, in his Gospel account, recorded Jesus telling his followers that if they stay silent about who he is, then "the rocks will cry out." Obviously, Jesus did not mean this literally, but he was using some over-the-top, hyperbolic language to convey a truth. He was basically saying that God can use anything,

even lifeless rocks, to get the message of who He is out for people to hear. So, God is not dependent upon us to get the message of hope out to others. Instead, He *lets us* participate in what He is doing, something at which He will never fail: ensuring that everyone, directly by Him, through us, or by some other means, will hear the Good news message in order to be saved.

God can directly reveal anything to anyone. It happens every day, and there are countless examples of this in the Bible. It can be a voice in their head or one from out of the sky. It can be an *internal* thing, to people out in the darkest, backwoods of Africa who have never heard about Jesus and God's love for them. They need only to respond to what little light God gives them, perhaps just through the beauty of creation (rocks, etc.) and just say to themselves, "I know there must be a God who made all of this and myself, so I'm gonna call upon Him right now, in faith, even though I can't see Him with my eyes." God always answers in the way that is best for each person, to start them down the path of getting to know Him better. Isn't this, basically, how we all started, by some realization about life, or maybe even some declaration made by someone who already believes? This is how God chooses to work in people's lives.

Here are two more parts of Paul's good and long question. *And how can they hear about Him unless someone tells them? And how will anyone go and tell them without being sent? The Old Testament writings say, "How beautiful are the feet of the messengers who bring Good News."* God has left some of the work of getting the message out up to those who already believe it and are benefiting from it daily. Who better can tell others how great the love of God is than those who experience it? This word, Good News (Gospel), does not mean to go out and threaten people in the name of God, trying to scare them into turning to God to solve their problem of sin in life. The Good News is not even an *offer*, revealing some kind of *transaction*

God is willing to make if people respond correctly. The Gospel (Good News) means, simply, to *announce*.

In ancient times, the Greek word *evangel* (from which we get the word evangelical) was an official announcement sent out across the land by those sent to deliver it. It could be announcing the birth of royalty, or that the victory in some war had just been won. It was the ancient version of a news flash on TV, or the dissemination of some important message via social media. This is why Paul adds, “How beautiful are the feet of the messengers who bring the Good News,” the announcement of God saving humanity by the cross of Christ, so they can hear it, believe it, and call upon God to save them from their bondage and limitations due to their sin.

Don't get all this backwards and think that you gotta do all this stuff, and then He'll save you. He saves you so you can hear about it, call upon Him, and say, “I'm in, God. I want to be an active part of what you are doing.” And at that moment, God says. “Welcome home. I already loved you. I already forgave you on the cross through my Son.” You have just now heard about the Good News and realized it; you're delivered and saved from the entanglement of sin in this life, not perfectly but essentially. Perfection comes in eternity, when you will be free from this “body of death” (as Paul puts it at the end of Romans Seven). You're saved from sin and death, which is what Jesus really saved us from on the cross. The proof of this is that Jesus rose from the dead, and so everyone, including you, someday will also. We will all rise in and be victorious over sin and death just as Jesus was.

Unfortunately, it's not a *prevention* program. It doesn't prevent us from sinning or dying as a result. The resurrection raises us from the dead after we've died. I have to thank God, in His wisdom, who is basically saying, “I'm gonna go ahead and let you die, but first I will come and die with you in the person of my Son, Jesus. And then, after I raise him from the dead, I will raise

all of you up, too. You're all going to be raised, without that old sinful nature, and you're going to be perfect in every way.”

Now that’s a real salvation program. It lacks nothing; it’s complete in every way. Jesus didn’t come just to teach and say, “Why don't you get on board with my teaching and try to change your heart and mind?” Instead, he is saying, “I will go ahead and let humanity die, every single person, and then I’ll raise everyone from the dead with a new body, a renewed soul, a new mind, and a new everything. Then, you’ll have made it into *full reconciliation* with me.” It’s really a wonderful and great salvation, more than just coming down, teaching people, and convincing them to change their political party or whatever. This is a complete re-creation of you and your body, and the whole world around you. It’s a marvelous salvation.

Jealousy Aroused (10:16)

Not everyone welcomes the Good News. Isaiah the prophet once asked God, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Paul now draws a big conclusion on everything he just wrote. This is another famous verse that many quote to inspire people to share their faith with others. Perhaps you have heard this one. *Faith results from hearing the Good News about Christ.* That’s true. When this message goes out, people believe it after they hear it. However, not everyone does so at that particular moment, as Paul pointed out above.

A friend recently asked me, “Is there a verse in the Bible that says *today* is the day of salvation? If so, then that means it has nothing to do with anyone preaching the Gospel if we cannot believe until somebody comes and tells us about it.” My answer was, “Absolutely. That’s the bottom line. God is the one who saved, and He can do it at any time, with or without anyone preaching. But generally, God seems to work things out so that

people hear the message, and then God works in them based on what they have heard about Jesus. He's still the one who saves and brings a changed heart, mind, and life. The Good News message going out is just a catalyst, bringing attention to what God has already done and what He will do in them."

It's like some little pigmy in the darkest regions of Africa, walking down some jungle path, looking at all of creation around him, and realizing in his own simple way. "There's got to be some kind of a god out there who created all of this. I want to know you, whoever you are. Please forgive me; I have not lived up to all I need to be. I need your help." Isn't that essentially what we do in our more advanced mindset? At that point, he is good to go with God because he now believes (minimal as it might be), and God will take it from there and help him grow in his knowledge of Him. Isn't this essentially what God does for us, before and after we believe? God begins to *actively* dwell in him (and us). He (and we) feel secure in the salvation he (we) now *experiences*, and always have had in God's mind and heart.

Paul then poses yet another good question for his readers to ponder. *But I ask, have the people of Israel actually heard the message? Yeah, they have.* As usual, Paul answers his own question, but this time with "Yes." They have heard it. They may not recognize. They may not even believe it, but they've heard it. It's right under their noses, yet they still don't get it. *The message has gone throughout the Earth and into all the world.* Everybody's heard this message in one form or another. *But I must further ask, did the people of Israel really understand what they heard? Yes, they did, for even in the time of Moses, God said, "I will rouse your jealousy through other people who are not even a nation."* God formed His nation, the Israelites, and planned to bring a Messiah to benefit all nations. They're going to be His chosen people. They're going to get a little

arrogant about it, but then, when the Messiah comes, He will open it up to everybody, which was His plan from the beginning. Unfortunately, the result of God doing all of this is that the Jews, who saw themselves as God's *only* chosen people, are going to become jealous of the other nations that God included. But this, as we shall see, will eventually be a good thing, because God "aroused their jealousy through other people" when they realized how God was working in all humanity, and not just in themselves exclusively.

I will provoke your anger through the foolish Gentiles. This is what God decided to do. This action by God is a bit provocative, but He has a purpose in doing so to accomplish His overall plan in the best possible way. This is the way that God is going to bring the Jews closer to Himself. It's a tough way to come, but that's how He's going to do it. *Isaiah spoke boldly for God, saying, "I was found by people who were not looking for me. I showed myself to those who were not asking for me. But, regarding Israel, I opened my arms to them, but they were disobedient and rebellious."* Sometimes, when people have the truth, and it's right under their noses, they still can't see clearly. We all know what this is like because we all do this kind of thing in some area of our lives. Our prejudices, upbringing, laziness, and zeal all contribute to it. Though we can't see our problem of shortsightedness at the time, it always becomes quite clear later in life. Then we try to warn our kids and others, only to find that they must learn the hard way just as we did. This seems to be the story of life.

6. Undeserved Kindness (Romans 11:1-10)

Does God reject people? (11:1)

We are now up into Romans Eleven. This chapter of Paul's letter ends the third of four parts, which is his *explanation* of the *solution* to the *problem*. Romans Eleven also concludes Paul's three-chapter answer to his question, "What about the Jews?" Romans Twelve will begin the fourth part of his letter, which is the *results*. But here in Romans Eleven, things get very interesting. He extends his idea that God has provoked Israel into jealousy by including the Gentiles in salvation, which, in their minds, was supposed to be exclusively theirs.

Paul starts out with: *Has God, then, rejected His own people, the nation of Israel?* He asks this question because of how he ended Romans Ten, with God saying, "I was found by people who were not looking for me. I showed myself to those who were not asking for me. But, regarding Israel, I opened my arms to them, but they were disobedient and rebellious." This is a huge contrast: Gentiles who weren't looking for God found Him, and the Israelites rejected the God they already had. They thought they were serving God and were His awesome group of people, but they were missing the mark. This is why Paul asked in verse one, "Has God rejected His own people?" Hey, they messed up, and the Gentiles started coming in in large numbers, while the

Israelites were rejecting Christ, and therefore, according to Paul, rejecting God. So, has God, in turn, rejected them?

Paul's answer is, *Of course not!* Does God ever reject anyone? Never, completely and totally, but He might for a short period of time to teach people something, saying, "I'm going to put you on hold and become a little bit remote from you, although I'm still guiding you and working in your life." God, in His infinite wisdom, never overreacts or falls short of reaching His goal in some way. He might do something like temporarily reject His people so they will learn, but it's always with a good purpose. Have you ever experienced anything like this in your life? Perhaps you are there now. If so, keep reading to see how God worked in Israel, just as He will surely work in your life. But count on Him to take His time and do things right! So, be patient with God and with yourself.

A friend told me she thought that God was not really rejecting the Jews, only correcting them. It just felt like rejection to many of them, just as it feels for us when we are disciplined by God. I have at times, and I know others have also, gone through difficult circumstances, and because my suffering (mentally or physically) continued way too long, God seemed nowhere to be found. It was as if He didn't even bother to show up. My friend is a counsellor, and she went on to tell me that people *project* motives and characteristics on God and others. They do this because what they are experiencing is dominating their lives, and they are looking for an explanation for it. So they assume that God (or others) is doing what they think *they themselves* would be doing if the roles were reversed. I have been on both ends of this: I have *projected* things on other people, and I have had them *project* things on me.

About fifteen years ago, when I discovered what grace is all about (God saving His world apart from anyone earning anything in return), I began sharing it with other people. There was a group

of fellow believers who were all good friends for more than 40 years; some of them were church leaders who became angry when I changed some of my beliefs. I told them that after looking into things very carefully for about 50 years, I had to follow the facts wherever they led. As I pondered their reaction, I tried to understand why they were so angry. I could only come up with two reasons. One was this idea of *projection*. I think they put themselves in my shoes and figured that if they did what I did (change their beliefs), they would do it out of anger toward their previous beliefs and people. But, for me, it was just the opposite. Because of what I had newly discovered about God, something none of them, nor in my childhood upbringing, ever told me about, that God loving this world meant that He would also save it, completely and finally. This idea was a revolutionary view of God that was only validated by my in-depth study of church history (before the 4th century) and the meanings of New Testament words in the ancient Greek language (in which it was written).

The only other reason I could come up with to explain the intense anger toward me by long-time friends, some loved ones, and a few respected church leaders was that I had discovered the greatest and most wonderful thing anyone could ever imagine: that God would save all humanity and no one would ever go to hell forever. Think about what that means and how amazing it would be if it were true. I think inside, they realized the beauty and joy of such a thing, but their *religion* would not allow them to believe it. By religion, I mean their upbringing, current status, security in an institution, all of the indoctrination they have received over the years, and their fear of having to change their thinking and realize they have been wrong for so many years. I know this kind of *religion*, because for sixty of my seventy-five years I lived in religious bondage, unable to break free, not really knowing how bound up I was. These are very powerful forces in anyone's life and are hard to escape. But when I did escape, by

“examining everything carefully,” as Paul exhorts his readers to do in his first letter to the Thessalonians, oh, the freedom, joy, peace, and thrill I experienced have never been matched in my life.

The last man standing (11:1b)

Paul goes on and writes, *I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, and a member of the tribe of Benjamin.* So he puts his credentials out there and basically says, “Look, I’m a Jew’s Jew; I was a high-ranking Pharisee.” He’s giving his resume, as he does many times elsewhere throughout his letters. *So I am living proof that God has not rejected His own people whom He chose in the beginning.* “Hey, God hasn’t rejected me!” claimed Paul. So, God hasn’t, and never will, reject His own people, whom He chose from the very beginning, any more than He would ever permanently reject anyone because He is the one, true God of the universe and of all creation, who so loves His world!

When God called Abraham, He was saying, “I’m gonna pick this guy out, and make a great nation out of him. His lineage, his descendants, and his offspring are going to grow and become a great nation. And then I’m going to bring my Savior, my Messiah, my Anointed One, out of this nation, and he will become the *Savior of the World*. What I do through you, Abraham, is for the whole world; it’s not just for you.”

Do you realize what the Old Testament writings say about this? Elijah the Prophet complained to God about the people of Israel in his day, saying, “Lord, they’ve killed your prophets and torn down your altars. I’m the only one left, and now they’re trying to kill me, too.” Have you ever felt like this, that somehow the whole world is against you? “I’m the only

one faithful to God in my neighborhood,” etc. And so, how did God reply to Elijah? He sure didn’t tell him, “Yeah, you’re right. You’re the only one who has stayed true to me. I’m so lucky to have you on my side as the last surviving loyalist!” Hardly! Instead, Paul writes, *Do you all remember what God's reply was? He said, "No. I have 7000 others who have never bowed to Baal.* I’m sure God had many more, but this is how many in Elijah’s limited world of influence. God always has plenty of people out there who seek Him and trust Him, but not always in the same way we do. He created humanity in great diversity, and so there are many different ways in which humans relate to God. Keep in mind that no one does it perfectly, and we all have flaws in our thinking and beliefs, since most of them are inherited from the culture in which we were born and live. God is pleased when people turn to Him the best they can, with all their limitations due to their sin. Remember what Paul wrote in Romans Three? “All humanity falls far short of God’s perfection,” placing us all on equal footing before God. God takes it from there in every person’s life. Never forget that salvation is a gift from God that cannot be earned in any way; it is an act of His grace, preventing anyone from bragging about saving themselves or even contributing to it in any way. Paul made all of this clear in chapter two of his letter to the Ephesians. (For more details on what grace is all about, see my commentary on Ephesians titled, *The Mysterious Plan Revealed.*)

So, God told Elijah, “You’re not the only one out there who has stayed loyal to Me. You’re just hiding in a cave, and you *think* you’re the only one, but you’re not.” *It's the same today,* Paul says to his readers in verse five: *A few of the people of Israel have remained faithful to God, but only because of God's grace, His undeserved kindness in choosing them.* This is an important passage because it defines what *grace* is. The few people

who remained faithful did so because of God's grace, which is His *undeserved kindness*. God is kind to us and kind to humanity, not because we deserve it, not because we earn it in any way, but because of who *He* is! It's completely by grace, unmerited favor, and that's the beauty of it. We don't have to try to earn anything with God. In fact, we can't. God doesn't wait for us to get on board before He does anything. He's always at work in us. When we finally get on board with Him and believe, God is already there, and things will go better for us. There is a type of *salvation* (or deliverance) that comes by our choosing to believe. And if we don't believe, we cut ourselves off from all such benefits of knowing God. But He never completely cuts us off or abandons us in any way, not before or after we believe, no matter what else we do.

So, it's because of God's grace, which is His undeserved kindness in choosing them, that any at all remained faithful. *Since it is through God's kindness that God chooses them, it is not based on their good works. If it were, God's grace would not be what it really is: free and undeserved favor.* Hey, this is probably the best place in the New Testament that defines what grace is, that it's "undeserved and unmerited favor from God," because that's what He does. He loves this world, and He's never going to give up on it. He will keep going until He saves every single person who has ever lived.

Closed eyes and ears (11:7)

Paul goes on. *So this is the situation. Most of the people of Israel have not found the favor of God that they are looking for so earnestly. A few have – the ones God has chosen by grace – but the hearts of the rest were hardened, just as the Old Testament writings say: "God has put them into a deep sleep."* Does He do this because He is mean, cruel, and has no

purpose in it? No way. Paul has already, here in this letter and all his letters, presented God as magnificently loving and gracious, always wanting the very best for all His creation. They've already hardened their hearts, and they rejected God, just as Pharaoh did in Romans Nine. God is just saying, "Okay, let's bring this hard-hearted thing that you've decided to do to its full conclusion so you can see what it's all about and see the unworthiness of it." Sometimes God brings us to a full conclusion of what we've decided to do, just as He did with Pharaoh, who had already hardened his heart. So, God basically said, "Okay, let's bring your heart to full hardness and let's see where it leads. Let me show you how great I am (through this experiment), along with my kindness and my saving work in you and everyone else." So, God in His wisdom put them into a *deep sleep*, which is just a figurative way of saying He has prevented them from seeing things clearly, causing them to experience the consequences of their decision to reject Him fully. This is not God acting cruelly; it is His *love in action*. Sometimes God must act with severity to get people to see what is good and right. Didn't we do this sometimes with our kids, rather than just patting them on the head and saying, "Go out and play, even though what you really need is my loving and severe discipline."

To this day, God has shut their eyes so they don't see and closed their ears so they don't hear. He has not done this because He hates them as retaliation against them, as many perceive this passage. Instead, God has done this because He loves them through this severe act of causing them to see the error of their way so they can, eventually, come and find peace with Him in salvation. His goal is not for them to never see or hear again, but to have them go through something that will bring attention to their problem. So, there's always a good purpose in everything God does, and His goal is always to redeem, restore, save, and reconcile all people to Himself. That's what He does.

Likewise, David said, "Let their bountiful table become a snare, a trap that makes them think all is well." Well, that does not seem very kind, either. In fact, it seems like some kind of deception by making them think all is well when it isn't. But this can be an action of love intended to do good as easily as an action of hate, intended to do harm. It all depends on *why* God wants them to experience a false sense of security. Could it be that the only way they will learn to depend on God and not themselves is to fall flat on their face? God's goal is not to see them suffer, but to ensure that any suffering they do is a result of their own foolishness and rebellion so that they can eventually escape all suffering, forever. God always plays *the long game* in our lives. He is never in a hurry to do things right, nor is He unwilling to allow (or bring on) severe experiences in order for us to learn what is needed.

The Jews had this special thing going with God. They were the nation of Israel, through whom God would bring His Messiah. This was their "bountiful table," and yet God let it become a *snare* to them. Have you ever had everything going for you in life, only to end up in trouble because you started thinking you're invincible? "Let their bountiful table become a snare, a trap that makes them think all is well." God's not doing something mean to them. He's just saying to them through His actions, "I already know where you're at. Let's bring this nonsense of yours to full fruition so you can learn from it."

Let their blessings cause them to stumble, and let them get what they deserve. let their eyes go blind so they cannot see, and let their backs be bent forever. Do you see what God is doing, and why, even though He must use extreme measures? I think this is a good example of the proverb that says, "Pride comes before a fall." It's their arrogance that is the problem, not

God. Heck, He's the one trying to help them escape their destructive behavior! They're really doing it to themselves; God is just ensuring they don't get stuck between success and failure, never resolving their problem. They need help, serious help, and God is providing it in a very serious way.

I did some of this *tough love* with my kids when they'd be out in the backyard fighting with neighbor kids. It seemed that the longer they played together, eventually some disagreement would arise. As long as there was no blood, I let them go at it because if I stopped the deteriorating situation, they would never learn what happens when they keep on fighting with each other. And so, God does this sometimes in our lives, just as He was doing in the life of rebellious Israel. He's not being mean. He's saying, "This is the only way you're going to learn, because if I step in, force peace, and make it all work out for you, you'll never experience how problems come about and how to solve them. It's a messy business, but it is the only path to eventual success."

7. Salvation of All Humanity (Romans 11:11-21)

Parts are as holy as the whole (11:11)

Did God's people stumble and fall beyond recovery? Paul shows that he knows how easily it would be for his readers to draw such a conclusion, that somehow God has given up on Israel. But his usual answer is employed here. *Of course not*, says Paul. *They were disobedient, prompting God to make salvation available to the Gentiles.* Actually, this was God's intention and goal from all eternity past, before He ever created this world and universe. But his message to the Jews is that God is saying, "I've given you salvation. I've made you a great nation. I've brought the Messiah, and he's right there under your noses, yet you rejected him and me! So, you know what? I'll take this Good News message to all those non-Jewish people out there and include them in my grand plan." God always had the whole world in mind. He started with Israel, but it was to spread out to all humanity, just as He promised to Abraham. But instead of doing the evangelistic work God had for them, the Jews rebelled against God instead. Bad decision! But before we get judgmental of them, aren't they in many ways a reflection of our own foolishness and rebellion against God?

But God wanted His people, the Jews, to become jealous and claim His salvation for themselves. Saving Jews and

Gentiles (all humanity) was always God's ultimate goal. He chose to use this natural response (jealousy) to cause the Jews to realize how important their salvation really is. God's purpose was not just to retaliate against religious Israel, any more than it is against us today. When God brings any severity or harshness, or whatever you want to call it, it's for the ultimate good of those He disciplines. I had to do this with my kids, and God had to do it with me. Sometimes such action is required in society, in an organization, or in a church. If not, chaos will prevail. Severity, seriousness, or something difficult is often needed to call people's attention to what needs to change in their personal lives or in a larger group. People take such actions in companies when they're trying to be successful. The process of discipline, correction, and limitation is needed everywhere in life, and so God must also do this with His special people. He does what it takes, and in this case, it was invoking a response of jealousy in Israel.

If the Gentiles were enriched because the people of Israel turned down God's offer of salvation, think how much greater a blessing the world will share when they finally accept it. You see what God's doing in His salvation endeavor. He's saying, "Look, my goal is for everyone to be saved. That's my greatest desire. And right now, the people through whom I brought salvation are rejecting me. So you know what? I'll go to all the non-Jewish people, bring them the Good News message of salvation (which I was going to anyway), and see if it turns the attention of my people that I love and bring them back on board with Me!" That would, indeed, be a blessing that the world together would share. And, since love never fails, that's exactly what will happen someday.

I am saying all this especially for you Gentiles. He's writing to the church at Rome, and he's addressing the non-

Jewish believers there, saying, "I want to commend you for your faith. But I also want to tell you how this all works concerning the Jews." *God has appointed me as an apostle to the Gentiles.* That's interesting because Paul was like the *John Wayne* of the Jews, one of the greatest, highest-ranking Pharisees before his conversion. God seemed to have chosen the person who was most zealous in opposing the Christians during the early days of their expansion, perhaps to prove the point that He can save anyone and, therefore, will save everyone. He says, "Ya know, my fellow Jewish people have rejected Christ, so I'm gonna go out to the Gentiles and tell them about Jesus and all he's done for them." That was his motive. He did all those missionary journeys recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*, and darn-near single-handedly spread the Good News all over the civilized world of that day, starting churches everywhere.

I stress this because I want to somehow make the people of Israel jealous of what you Gentiles have, with the goal of saving some of them. Or, so that they will be saved. Paul knew he didn't actually save anyone, but he participated in what God was doing to save them. This is true of us today. We genuinely want our friends and family, and even people we don't know, to come and follow Jesus, gaining the new life of freedom and peace that we have. Yet, we know it is God who saves and changes hearts. Like God, we just want them to be delivered from a life of struggle and destruction.

*Since their rejection prompted God to offer salvation to the rest of the world, their eventual acceptance will be even more wonderful. Do you see what Paul is saying here? It will be life for those who were dead. And since Abraham and the other Patriarchs were holy, their descendants will also be holy. Keep in mind that *holy* just means to "set something apart"*

for a special purpose. The Jews were a special group that God had formed into a nation. Therefore, their descendants will also be special, holy, and set apart for God's purpose. He gives an illustration here. *An entire batch of dough is special (holy) even though only a portion of it is given as an offering to God. In the same way, since the roots of a tree are holy (special), the branches will also be.* He gives these two illustrations, a batch of dough and tree branches, to provide a picture of how God deals with Israel. My wife just made cookies yesterday. Chocolate chip! As soon as she mixes the chocolate chips into the dough, it flavors the whole batch. And as she creates individual cookies from the batch of dough, each cookie is chocolate-chip flavored. If one cookie has chocolate chips, all of them do. So, Paul is saying that the nation of Israel is kind of like a batch of dough, or like a tree. The roots that God started through Abraham extend out into the whole tree of Israel.

God doesn't give up on people. We give up on them sometimes, but God never does. He is true to the next generation and the one after that, all the way down to us and beyond in the future. He keeps on saying, "I'm going to work something special in all people's lives, and we're all going to go through this together. I will leave no one behind."

Broken off and grafted in (11:17)

However, some of these branches from Abraham's tree (that is, some of the people of Israel) have been broken off. So keep in mind, as we go through this next section, that God acts in severity toward Israel, but this does not mean He hates them or will abandon them. Quite the contrary, He loves them and is working in a way that will be best for them in the long run. And you Gentiles who were branches from a wild olive tree have been grafted in. So now you have also received the blessing

God has promised Abraham and his children, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God's special olive tree. So the people who are already part of the community are rejecting God and cutting themselves off from Him. So God says, "I'll go get a bunch of Gentiles, bring them in, they'll love it, and they'll be part of it," making Israel jealous. It's kind of like the prodigal son; he came back, and his dad embraced him. The good son who stayed at home said, "Hey, wait a minute. What about me?" Yet it made him realize what love and grace are and that he'd had it all along, though He might have had a bad attitude about what he had.

Same thing here with Israel. God, in His wisdom, says. "I'll use this whole contrast between Jews and Gentiles, the *haves* and the *have-nots*, and swap it around. Because it's really about me doing something, and you putting your trust in me for a better life." So, the Gentiles, too, received the blessing God has promised to Abraham and his children, sharing in the rich nourishment from the root of God's special olive tree.

But you must not brag about being grafted in to replace the branches that were broken off. You're just a branch; you're not the root. The Gentiles being grafted in can be tempted to do the same thing the Jews did. Right? Aren't we all a little like this? As soon as things get better for us, we get overconfident and arrogant. We always need to remember that every good thing we get is from God, by His grace; otherwise, we'll get ourselves in trouble. Well, you might be tempted to conclude that those branches were broken off to make room for you. See, the Gentiles could get arrogant and in a hurry, thinking, "Those Jews got ousted to make room for me. I'm gonna come in and be part of the community here." And I'm sure there was a lot of that kind of nonsense going on. Yes. That's true. But remember, those branches were broken off because they didn't believe in

Christ. God didn't just break them off for no reason. He didn't say, "I'm done with you. I'm gonna throw you away." They broke themselves off because they didn't believe; they distanced themselves from that community of knowing Christ. *And you are there because you believed.* It wasn't because these Gentiles did anything, or because they earned anything. It was not because they're any better or worse than the Jews. They're included because they chose to believe in God, who has the character, love, and desire to save everyone.

So don't think highly of yourself; instead, fear what could have happened to you. This isn't a matter of being afraid of God, who might cut you off at any minute without you deserving it. What he's saying is, "Be careful and don't get an arrogant attitude because the same thing can happen to you that happened to the Jews." *God did not spare the original branches, and He won't spare you either.*

It's really interesting the way it works. If God needs to cut some people out to make them jealous to make room for others, and then graft those originals back in so that all will be saved, then that's what He will do. This is where it's going to end up, here in Romans Eleven. God only cuts them off because they cut themselves off by turning their backs on Him (just as Pharaoh did). God doesn't force Himself on anyone. He never does. He doesn't need to. And so we can be out there living with really severe and harsh results, but it's what we've done to ourselves that causes all of this. Paul's going to get into this even more thoroughly in the remaining part of this chapter.

8. Kindness and Severity of God (Romans 11:22-36)

Trusting God's kindness (11:22)

Notice how God is both kind and severe. This is a really important passage. I quote it a lot. "Behold the goodness and severity of God," is how it is worded in some translations. For me, Paul is saying, "God is severe in His kindness, and He's kind in His severity." God loves just like a good parent, only perfectly. One who loves must occasionally bring some degree of severity in order to also bring correction. This is impossible to avoid for any parent, earthly or heavenly. We view God's loving discipline as harshness because we don't like it. But that's because we do not see the good purpose in it, and even when we do, we still don't like it. But this doesn't stop God. He always does what is best for us, whether we like it or not. He does this in order to accomplish the good purpose He has in saving people from sin and all the destruction it brings. So notice how God is both kind *and* severe. Yeah, we love kindness. God is kind. No question about it. But He's also severe. However, when He's severe, it is done in kindness. And when He's kind, He also has to bring some severity in order for that kindness to be effective, to accomplish something. But God's not severe or mean just to retaliate against us. That's not who God is.

He is severe toward those who disobey. Yeah. Good for you, God. I was severe toward my kids when they disobeyed me, but it was rooted in my love for them. If I loved them and didn't want them running out in the street and being hit by a car, I must act in some kind of severity. I might grab them (perhaps, just in time) and say in a serious tone of voice, "Hey, don't do that." I must be severe about it, or it won't mean anything as a warning. I wouldn't say, "Oh, nice little Johnny," and affectionately pat him on the head. However, I would give him a hug *after* the severe warning to let him know how much I love him. The same is true with God when He lovingly deals with us. He can at times be severe, but it is also an act of love on His part. It is never hatred; It is always love.

So, according to Paul, God is severe toward those who disobey, *But He's kind to you when you continue to trust in His kindness.* When we are trusting God and doing what is right, there is no need for any kind of severity. I seldom had to act severely with my kids to correct them, but I did so when they needed me to. Same with God. *But if you stop trusting* (which we can do at any time; we all have that freedom), *you, too, will be cut off.* Now, that doesn't mean God's going to say, "If you don't trust me, I'm going to cut you off, throw you away, and send you to hell forever." We are temporarily cut off by God because we cut ourselves off from Him by not trusting in Him. We've all done that to some degree in our lives. Have you ever had a time when you said to yourself, "I'm going to get away from God and do my own thing?" You didn't necessarily hate God, but you were not trusting Him either, cutting yourself off from Him. When we do this, we have a hardened heart like Pharaoh and rebellious unbelief like the Israelites. But God is always kind, even when He temporarily cuts us off (because we cut Him off), doing so for

our own good. God will never cut you off from something good, nor will He ever cut you off forever.

But if the people of Israel turn from unbelief, they will be grafted back in again. See, God always says, "Come on in. Come unto me all you who labor and are heavily burdened, and I'll give you rest." That's always His invitation and plea. He has no other desire in His heart for people. He never says, "Don't bother coming. I didn't choose you." He never pulls that nonsense. It's always, "I want you to come to me, and even if you don't, I'm coming after you. Not to send you to hell forever in judgment, but to save you!" CS Lewis called God the *Hound of Heaven*, who goes and chases down every last lost sinner in the farthest place away from Him. Remember the Parable by Jesus of leaving the flock to go find that one lost sheep in need of salvation? That is each one of us! God has the power to graft them back into the tree. He can, He will, and He does.

You, Gentiles, by nature were a branch cut from wild olive trees. Talking now to the Gentiles, Paul has God saying that they came from somewhere else. They weren't a part of the original Jewish nation that brought the Messiah. That doesn't make them any less important or any less valuable to God. They just weren't part of that early stage in God's plan to save the world. So, if God was willing to do something contrary to nature by grafting you into His cultivated tree, He will be far more eager to graft the original branches back into the tree where they belong. Yes! That is the loving, never-giving-up kind of God that we know and love. That's always His goal for everyone, Jews and Gentiles, to make them into *one* saved humanity. Isn't this great?

Paul's letter to the Ephesians has this idea of making two groups into one as its theme. (See my commentary titled *The*

Mysterious Plan Revealed for details.) Why read into Paul's letters a bunch of negative stuff about God being a retaliator who sends people to hell forever, when we can see Him in the magnificence in which He always exists? If anyone steps out of line, through rebellion, unbelief, or lack of trust, guess what happens? God doubles down on saving them. He says, "Okay, I'm rolling up my sleeves, and I'm going to become both *severe* and *kind*, bringing everyone to myself. I'm going to do whatever it takes! I'm never giving up."

All "Israel" will be saved (11:25)

Check out what Paul writes next. This is his grand conclusion of everything he has previously written in Romans 9 – 11. *I want you to understand this mystery, dear brothers and sisters...* Paul just went through this whole thing about branches being cut out and grafted in for unbelief and rebellion, but now he wants his readers to understand what this all means ... *so that you will not feel proud about yourselves*. It's easy for humans to slip into arrogance and pride. We all do it, especially when things are going well in life, and we start thinking, "I'm pretty hot stuff here, these days," when actually it's really not anything about us. It's about God. Who He is and what He wants. This may seem like we are diminishing ourselves by being humble, but actually, we are elevated to the highest possible position when we glorify God and focus on Him. Otherwise, we live in a very puny place, and we don't realize we are in such a valueless situation. Only when we emerge from it do we see how spiritually bankrupt we were and how high and lifted up we have become in Christ!

Some of the people of Israel have hard hearts. Yes, some do. But Nicodemus didn't, nor did Joseph of Arimathea. There were other Jews who came to Christ and did not have hard hearts,

but not many Pharisees, who were the leaders of the religious establishment of that day. I sometimes ask people, "If Jesus came today, who would the Pharisees be?" I hate to admit it, but there was a time in the past when it was me! I did not know it at the time, nor do many today realize that they fit that mold. It is an easy role to slip into and a harder one to get out of!

But this will last only until the full number of Gentiles comes to Christ. Though all people will eventually be saved and realize who Jesus and God are, some of them perhaps not until eternity, only some people back in Paul's day (and still today) will experience "coming to Christ." Remember, he invited *all* to come, and he meant it: "Come to me, all of you who are heavy burdened by life, and I will give you rest!" Seems to me that he was inviting everyone, expressing his deepest desire for humanity. Is there any reason why He would ever give up on anyone before His desire is fulfilled? Why would He, when He has the desire and ability to save every lost soul?

According to Paul, there is some undisclosed number of Gentiles who will come to Christ, perhaps in his lifetime or, more likely, by the time God brings all things to a grand conclusion at the end of time. Since he does not give a specific number, it could be all humanity, or not. This is not unlike what we discovered in Romans Five, where Paul refers to those who are in Christ as *many*, yet he also identifies them as *all*. So when the full number of Gentiles, which will eventually be all of them, come to Christ, he then concludes that: *All Israel will be saved*. How can it be that when the Gentiles come to Christ, it is "all Israel" that is saved? Watch carefully for his explanation below.

As the Old Testament writings say, "The one who rescues will come from Jerusalem, (that would be Christ), and he will turn Israel away from ungodliness." Yep, that's what he did.

That's His job. *And this is my covenant* (God's agreement with them), *I will take away their sins*. God's kind of agreements (covenants) are not, "If you do something, then I'll do something in return," not when it comes to ultimate salvation. That's a mere *transaction* between two individuals; salvation is too important to leave up to those who need to be saved! However, *experiencing* the salvation that God brings by His grace is up to each person, and when they reject God or choose unbelief, they miss out on all the good things God has in store for them. But there is no way God is going to pile on even more misery by tormenting unbelievers and sinners forever, as an act of pure retaliation. Instead, God will ensure that they eventually see His love and grace, turning to Him to know Him for all eternity. How could He do anything less and still be God?

Mercy bestowed on everyone (11:28)

Many of the people of Israel are now enemies of the Good News. That's true. They were. They were opposed to it. They tried to snuff it out, and Paul along with it. They were against it. **But this benefits you Gentiles**, and that's because God reaches out to everyone, Jews and non-Jews, saying, "Come on in, everyone. I want you all to be saved from your foolishness and sin!"

A friend once told me his view of all this is that God is not cutting people off from Himself, but instead from "religion," which disguises itself as God. He's cutting them off *at the pass* (so to speak) because they're going back to religion, where they stay in bondage. God cuts them off so He can bring them back (graft them in) to experience something so much better as a part of a completely saved and redeemed humanity.

Let me give an illustration. I've got prostate cancer, and so they will operate and remove it. Fortunately, it was caught before spreading. Surgery is pretty severe. They don't call it *radical surgery*

for nothing. Okay, it's gonna hurt. But, ultimately, it's a good kind of hurting, and well worth it to prevent worse hurting and death. This is how God sees us. He needs to come in and cut away the cancer of sin (and even some aspects of *religion*) from our lives because it's slowly killing us. He knows what He must do is painful, but He does it anyway and asks us to trust Him as the great *spiritual physician*.

We bring the *cancer of sin* into our lives. We've all said, "I'm gonna take a break from God," (cut ourselves off from Him). Or, "I'm mad at you, God, because you allowed me to experience more pain than I could handle." But He just answers, "Well, I'm not mad at you. In fact, I love you more than you will ever know. I'm coming after you in a good way, even though it includes things that are difficult. And if you run away from me, I'll chase you down anywhere and everywhere, until I win, which is the best thing that could ever happen to you." God loves us. He'll never give up on us, and He always comes after us. But according to Paul, many Israelites are enemies of the Good News, but this ends up being a benefit to the Gentiles because God "works all things together for good." Do you remember this passage at the end of Romans Eight in Volume 1 of this commentary?

Yet the Jews are still the people He loves because He chose their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This man, Abraham, and his immediate descendants founded the special group of people that became the now-historical Nation of Israel. They brought the Messiah, Jesus, who saved the world from sin. One classical author called Jesus *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. It wasn't because these patriarchs were better than anyone else, only that God chose them out of all persons living at that time (around 2000 BC) to begin the execution of His plan of salvation. Had we lived back then, it could have been you or me that God chose. God did not choose the *best* man; He chose the *right* man. Abraham had the qualities (and flaws) that God needed to

accomplish all He had in mind. He still does this today in our lives. Each of us has a journey, ordained by God, custom-fitted for who we are and how we fit into His overall plan. We may not be as famous as Abraham, but we are just as important and precious to God as if each of us were the only human He had created! Never forget this.

God's gifts and callings can never be withdrawn. That is so good to know. How could it be any other way? God alone is perfectly trustworthy, and He alone knows far ahead of time what He is going to do and why. He is never wrong and never makes a mistake. Think about that in light of how utterly flaky we are even on our best day. When God calls us to do something and brings gifts to help us do it, it never needs to be withdrawn or revised. In a sense, it is *ordained* for us, perfectly, completely. So, we can always trust God in all He does and allows in life. God is never going to give up and say, “Yes, I did call you to do something good, and I gave you the gifts you need to accomplish these good things, but I think I changed my mind, I did not really think this all through!”

At one time, you Gentiles were rebels against God, but when the people of Israel rebelled against God, He showed mercy to you instead. God did not do this out of spite. He is not petty; He's magnanimous, always acting in the best interest of those He loves. He loves Israel and just wants them to understand what mercy is and that it is theirs if they will only accept it. What better way to demonstrate this than to show mercy to some other group of people who are seen as “not chosen by God.” This would make anyone angry, maybe even jealous. Sometimes God has to use our jealousy, our sinful nature, to call attention to what we need. He does that kind of thing, just as He did with Israel back in Paul's day.

For sure, they are rebels, and God's mercy has come to you Gentiles so that Israel, too, will eventually share in God's mercy. Do you see what God's doing? He's working His perfect will so that everybody gets saved in the end, even if it's a painful, difficult, severe process. God is saying by His actions, "I'll do whatever I need to do because I've created humans able to make their own decisions. But I'm bigger than that, and I never need to force anybody to respond correctly. My love will always win, and I will always do whatever it takes to show them how wonderful I am and how much I love them."

Here is an amazing statement that Paul makes as he nears the end of his three chapters about the Jews (9-11) and ends the longest part of his letter, which is his *explanation* of the solution (4-11). This statement sums up everything he has said and puts everything in perspective. I see it as his grand conclusion, right before He ends by pointing to God as the one who always deserves glory and honor. *God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience, enabling Him to show mercy to all humanity.* Do you remember what Paul reported God having said, back in Romans Nine? "I will have mercy on whoever I want." Well, this passage makes it clear that His desire is to show mercy to everyone, and He will do whatever it takes to bring this about. It is not enough for God to just *show* mercy to people; it is essential that they understand it and receive it. Otherwise, it will be of little real value. This is why God has to take drastic measures of cutting branches (people) away and grafting others in, so that He can eventually (as a result of jealousy) graft in all branches (people), bringing salvation to all humanity!

In eternity, when all is said and done, and God has successfully completed His plan of salvation that He had in mind before the world was created, everyone will see God for all that He is, in all His glory, grace, kindness, love, and wisdom. At that

time, “every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is indeed Lord of all.” It won't be God putting His foot on their throats, threatening them, saying, “You better confess and admit who I am.” He will not need to; it will be obvious to all. And even better, everyone will be so thankful for the salvation God brought into their lives. They will realize it was something they did not bring about and were not even looking for! They will be saying, “Oh wow, what was the matter with me in life? You're such a wonderful God. You're such a wonderful Savior. I claim you as my Lord, and I confess you with my mouth for all to hear. This is the new desire of my heart!”

I think what this ultimately means is that God has allowed everyone to fall into disobedience and sin, without Him overreacting and sending people to hell forever. Instead, He chooses to show mercy on everyone and save the world. This is probably one of the few verses in the whole New Testament that tells why God does what He does, in the way He does, and why He allows so much evil and suffering in the world. It is all part of His infinitely wise plan to save His creation that He so loves! Why did He allow the world to fall? Why did He create us with the ability to make bad decisions? According to Paul, it was so that He could show mercy on us and prompt us to come to Him, drawn by His love. And when we get there, we will conclude, “This is really great. I wouldn't have known how wonderful God was if I hadn't sinned, acted silly and stupid, and gone through so many lousy and crappy experiences. But now I see the difference. You're such a wonderful God. If you had made me automatically believe, remaining like an innocent little child, I would never have learned what love is and what a wonderful savior you are.” You may recall, in the middle of Romans Eight (see volume 1 of this commentary), Paul said that God subjected all creation to *futility*, in hope (overwhelming confidence) that it would reveal who we all are as sons and daughters of God. Romans 9-11 answers Paul's question, “What about the Jews?” by telling the whole story of

how God provoked the Jews to jealousy by showing mercy to the Gentiles, with the ultimate goal of bringing them back to Himself and causing the whole world to be saved!

Everything comes from God (11:33)

Finally, Paul ends this largest part of his letter focusing on God. How appropriate! How *great are God's riches, wisdom, and knowledge!* How *impossible is it for us to understand His decisions and His ways?* Yep. Pretty darn impossible. I don't understand it. Does anybody out there understand? *For who can know the Lord's thoughts; who knows enough to give Him advice?* I sure don't. I don't think anybody does. *And who has given to Him so much that He needs to pay them back?* I don't think I've given God anything. What would it be? He's already got everything. Ah, but there is one thing I can give Him that is mine to give. He will never force it from me because then it would not be real. It is my returned love for Him and my trust in Him. That's all He wants, and we all have that to give.

Everything comes from Him, and everything exists by His power and is intended for His glory. Now, before we draw the conclusion that God's a glory hound, the reason all glory needs to go to Him is for *our* benefit, not His. We will all glorify something in this life; something will grab our attention and gain our focus. If this is anything other than God, though it may dazzle us temporarily, it will never make us happy or satisfied in any significant, lasting way. We *need* to glorify God, not because He needs it, but because we need it. Doing this will bring about the greatest good for us. That's all He wants.

There is a classical, best-selling devotional book from the late 1800s titled: *My Utmost for His Highest*. It was written by Oswald Chambers and is full of daily insights on walking down the road

of life with God, emphasizing the importance of focusing on God and glorifying Him. But I would turn that title around and bring out the other side of this coin. I would title it, "*His Utmost for My Highest*. Yes, we need to give our utmost for God, but perhaps the most important thing to know is that God gives His utmost for our highest good. I think this is always Paul's theme in all of his letters because it is what God's grace is all about. It's not what we do for Him, but what He does for us that counts!

**Part IV:
The Results
(Romans 12-16)**

9. A Living Sacrifice (Romans 12:1-3)

That's the end of Chapter 11, the end of Paul's three-chapter section answering, "What about the Jews, and the end of the longest part of his letter *explaining* God's *solution* to humanity's *problem*. I hope you can now see what a special challenge Romans 9-11 really is. There are a lot of potentially confusing things in there about loving and hating, cutting and grafting, and a few other thorny issues. But all were needed for Paul to accurately explain how God deals with humanity (Jew and Gentile) to fulfill His grand purpose of saving His world.

I have a friend who concluded that in spite of all the confusing and harsh topics dealt with on the surface, these three chapters are really about the Grace of God bringing salvation to all humanity, no matter what it takes, grafting people in and out as needed to create one big, saved, human race. Though it is really people who cut themselves out and resist God, it is God who chases them down and brings them in, because He's never going to give up on anyone. He eventually brings mercy to all, and that's why he allows human disobedience and all the trouble that comes with it. It is a very wise and perfect plan by God. He knows that it takes time to get all that hindering *religion* out of people; for some, it takes a lifetime, but God never gives up.

A quick review

Let me provide a quick review of Romans 1-11 before continuing. Having the *problem*, *solution*, and *explanation* clearly in mind is key to understanding the *results* that Paul will present in Romans 12-16. Early on, I identified this letter as “Christianity 101, 102, 103...” because it covers all the essentials of the Christian faith. It is like taking a sequence of college classes that thoroughly work through some particular subject. As you may recall, we’ve covered all kinds of issues, ideas, and themes having to do with God, Jesus, salvation, faith, law, works, temptation, resurrection, and eternity.

In Romans 1 and 2 (and the first half of 3), Paul presented the *problem* confronting humanity, and it was all about sin, which is “missing the mark” in life. This is something we all do that plagues us every day. He even gave a list of sins and shortcomings common to all people, including: greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, gossiping, insolence, and pride. Do you ever experience any of these? He also dealt with *same sex* issues, which for him were *unnatural* relationships that God gives people over to (tolerates). However, it was an interesting side note that Jesus never mentions this in all of his teaching, neither supporting nor condemning same sex relationships. So, it seems that each person must decide how important this subject is for them, either way.

After Paul describes the *problem*, he then spends only half a chapter (the second half of Romans Three) describing the *solution*. It's so short you could miss it. It's like driving through a small berg on a county road. The solution is simply that Jesus died on the cross and we are *made right* with God by his shed blood (his death). That's pretty much it! However, what exactly does that mean? This prompts Paul to spend the next eight chapters of his letter (4-11) *explaining* the *solution* that solves the *problem* in great detail.

Romans Four was all about faith, which is a major theme throughout Paul's letters and the whole New Testament. Faith is the way in which we engage with God and receive all the benefits of salvation, which He already took care of through Jesus on the cross. Paul makes it clear that our faith earns us nothing with God, but it is something very important just short of that. One interesting observation is that faith is not mentioned after the beginning of Romans Five until the end of Romans Nine. That's nearly five chapters of the sixteen total in his letter; nearly a third. Why? Because faith, important as it is, is not the basis of God's salvation, Grace is! In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he wrote this: "It is by grace that we are saved, it is not something we do, it is a gift from God, so that no one can ever brag about their salvation." That pretty much says it all.

In Romans Five, Paul makes it clear that "while we were still sinners," lost in our sin, not seeking God, that God came and found us by sending His one and only Son into this world, to live and die and save us from sin. Wow. Paul calls this *genuine* love. Then He launches into a comparison of Adam, as the original head of the human race who plunged us into sin and death, with Jesus, as the last and final Adam, who brought us into perfection (righteousness) and life. This contrast is the key to understanding what salvation by grace is all about.

Romans Six has got to be one of the great chapters in the New Testament. In it, Paul describes how everything that happened to Jesus (death, burial, and resurrection) has also happened to us. This is the result of Jesus coming into this world, becoming fully human, and dying *with, for, and even as* us to bring us eternal life. As a result, he tells his readers they are now free to see themselves "no longer slaves to sin." Instead, they can live a new life in Christ, making them all *new* creations.

However, there is still one snag, and Paul describes this in a very personal way in Romans Seven. It is about his struggle between the *new person* he now is in Christ and the *old person* he

once was as a sinner, which still lingers, tempting him to do wrong rather than right. He ends Romans Seven asking, “Who will free me from this body of death?” His answer is that this is only found in Jesus.

In Romans eight, Paul gives details about this wonderful deliverance (salvation) that is found only in Jesus, saying that God accomplished in him something the law could never do. He also talks about how all creation suffers, waiting for God to transition us all into a safe and secure eternity, and how “God works all things together for good,” transitioning each person into salvation, never losing anyone along the way. Finally, he hits his highest note, proclaiming that “nothing can ever separate us from God’s love,” listing just about all possible situations and powers in heaven and earth that threaten us.

Romans 9 through 11, which we just finished, is Paul’s explanation of how God works in the life of the Nation of Israel in light of the new message about Jesus and how he is their long-awaited messiah and savior of the world. Remember Paul’s illustration of the tree that represented Israel, and how he cut off branches (people) temporarily to make room for wild branches (Gentiles) to be grafted in? This action by God made the Jews jealous, prompting them to recognize Jesus as their Messiah and allowing them to be grafted back in, resulting in one saved humanity. That is quite an amazing plan by God, accomplishing His ultimate goal. The best part was at the end of Romans Eleven, where Paul stated his grand conclusion that God had “imprisoned everyone in disobedience,” not that He put them there, but that He allowed it so that He could show mercy on everyone (Jew and Gentile alike). This was always God’s goal from the beginning of time.

Then Paul finishes with, “How great are God’s riches in wisdom and knowledge?” How great is it? Obviously, it’s a rhetorical question. He also asked, “How impossible is it for us to understand his decisions and his ways?” Impossible! Then, his

final words before launching into Romans Twelve and all the *results* he will describe, are: “For everything comes from God and exists by His power and is intended for his glory. All glory to Him forever! Amen.”

Living sacrifices (12:1)

In Paul's lengthy *explanation* part of his letter (Romans 4-11), he gives his readers information but seldom tells them what to do about it or what will result from it. Well, starting here in Romans Twelve (through the end of his letter), Paul will begin suggesting what people can do in life, now that they are free from sin in Christ. It is likely that Paul believed they needed all the information about God's saving work in them before they would be ready to act upon it in a positive way. He is effectively saying, “Okay, here's what you need to do; here's how you need to live based on all that I've just told you.” For example, in Romans Twelve, which we will dig into soon, Paul tells them, “Don't just pretend to love others, really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Never be lazy; work hard and serve God enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope, be patient in trouble, and keep on praying.” That's just a sample. It is one of my favorite practical passages in the New Testament. Living by such principles will give you a life of peace, freedom, and spiritual success.

Instead of starting out his letter telling people what to do and how to live their lives, Paul first tells them everything about God, everything about salvation, everything about Jesus, everything about walking with him daily so that when they try to go live successfully, it will be based on knowing God and living in Him rather than in their own effort and strength. This makes all the difference in the world!

Paul starts out Romans Twelve in this way: Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you based on God's mercy and all He's done for you, that you give your bodies to be a living and holy sacrifice, the kind of sacrifice God will be pleased with. This is the true way to worship God. Paul is saying to his readers that everything he's presented in the previous 11 chapters is what God has *already* done for them, and that they should become a *living* sacrifice (not a dead one, as carried out under the Old Testament law). This is pretty much the first time in Paul's letter where he tells anyone to do anything. It appears that Paul wanted to lay the groundwork of factual information about the *problem, solution, and explanation* before he started giving advice on how to live (the *results*). God's not looking for people to go lay down on an altar and cut their own throat, right? The kind of sacrifice He finds acceptable is the kind that lives. It walks around, it breathes, it takes action. In other words, how can we live for Him? That's what He wants.

I think the whole Old Testament sacrificial system was far inferior to this kind of living sacrifice. In fact, later in the Old Testament, through one of the prophets, God said to the Jews, "I hate your sacrifices." I think He hated them because they were phony and didn't really accomplish anything of substance. God doesn't want people to kill animals and sprinkle their blood on an altar and on worshippers! What a messy, violent thing to do, and what does it accomplish? Nothing! According to the New Testament writers, it was only symbolic of the death of Jesus that would someday come. I think it is more likely that people came up with such a bloody, violent, messy practice, and God went along with it, knowing it would be used to symbolize something truly important. God knew that this tendency to *appease the gods* was embedded in their pagan hearts, and it would take a long time to instruct them out of it. I think God figured, "We'll work this experiment. We'll do the law. We'll do sacrifices. I'll require you

to do sacrifices a certain way, and you will get sick and tired of keeping the law that you thought would be so great. I'll use this to prove to you that it's not required to get right with me, underscoring this all the more when I send my Son into the world to fully reveal me.”

So, God allowed them to experience *law* for hundreds of years, something they made a big deal of and kept a record of, setting up an amazing contrast between law and grace, which is exactly the lesson God wanted them to learn. They wanted to do sacrifices, and so God effectively said, “I'll become the sacrifice you are looking for by sending my only son to die at your hands. But it will be a *perfect* sacrifice, one that actually resolves your problem of sin that is so destroying you.” So Jesus came, he lived, he taught, he set an example of goodness, and he became the ultimate sacrifice they needed to save them. Yet, they hated him and killed him, but that just made Jesus a sacrifice in which God did not retaliate or act in violence against them. Instead, He demonstrated His love for them, even though at the time they did not see this. God always does what is right and best, even when no one understands it. He has a master plan to save the world, and nothing can ever stop Him from executing that plan fully and successfully. God in His wisdom used the death of Jesus as an opportunity to join humanity in its suffering and death, only to rise from the dead and be victorious over death on behalf of all people, forever!

That's quite a message, and it's altogether different from finding something to kill to *appease the gods* in some way in an attempt to cancel out guilt, shame, and fear that have been the trademarks of religion since the beginning of time. So Paul urges them, in light of all he has previously written, to let their bodies be a living sacrifice, holy (set apart) unto God, no longer to appease Him but to serve Him and their fellow human beings, all equally loved by God. It is a special sacrifice, the kind God finds

acceptable, unlike the pagan sacrifices and the sacrificial system under the Old Covenant (agreement).

Change the way you think (12:2)

Paul goes on and says, *Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world.* Don't try to do what everyone else out there is doing. Don't try to *appease the gods*; God does not require this. He wants your genuine, natural, spontaneous, grateful love. He knows we are happiest when we return His love; otherwise, it's all about ourselves. Don't get into a sacrificial system, whether it's animal sacrifice or sacrificing yourself in some way that does not please God, trying to prove yourself to Him rather than just abide with Him, which is all He desires. A legalistic self-sacrifice lifestyle just brings stress and pressure, wondering if you are performing well enough to impress God. How foolish!

But instead, let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. What needs to change is our minds and how we think. God does not need to change His mind and think differently about us. He loves us as we are, though He wants us to become something better. We are the ones who need to change and be transformed in our thinking, gaining a new perspective and mindset. However, God has *already* essentially changed us in Christ on the cross. We're all new creations in Christ. Everybody is. Everyone in the world has been changed by God; some just don't know it yet. That's the Good News! What still needs to change is their perspective in their mind about who they already are in Jesus. *Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good, pleasing, and perfect.*

Now those are two amazing verses. They have been memorized by people since they were penned almost 2000 years

ago. Talk about standing the test of time, these verses do, and so do many others in Paul's writings and in the New Testament. One of the highlights in my Philippians commentary, *The Peace of God from the God of Peace*, is all the memorable passages that people have memorized and held dear for ages. Some translations express these two verses in this way: "Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." That is a lot to ponder. Read it a few times and let it sink in. It describes a whole different way of living and thinking. If a person only had these two verses, they would essentially have all they need to live successfully, but it is always nice to have more explanation and additional information. Paul will be providing this in the remaining part of his letter.

It is noteworthy that Paul says that if we live and think this way, we will discover what God's will is for us! Wow, that's good to know. Isn't that what we all want, those of us who love God and want to follow Jesus? There is nothing more satisfying in life than knowing and living in God's will. But this is different for everyone, customized by God for each of us, who is a unique and special creation, one of over 8 billion people so far! You won't have to go out and try to find God's will; it will find you when you present yourself to Him as a *living* sacrifice. You will automatically be in God's will, which includes struggles and difficulties along with all the blessings He has for you. It'll be whatever happens because it's ultimately good, pleasing, perfect, and something He has planned for us before we were even born. That's how detailed and successful God is in taking care of us and ensuring that we end up in close fellowship with Him forever.

Don't see yourself as better than you are (12:3)

Because of the privilege and authority that God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think you're better than you really are. Paul hasn't really given any commands or warnings thus far in his letter. But he's going to get serious now about telling his readers what they should and shouldn't do. I don't think he's bossing people around as much as trying to help them live better lives. Look at how he started Romans Twelve: "I plead with you, based on God's mercy." Paul is always careful to place the responsibility to do what is right on each individual, not on himself. However, sometimes he lets people know what the natural consequences are of ignoring God's instructions for better living. Occasionally, these are actions of God as He works to correct people and improve their lives. But usually, the consequences of sin are natural, and God wants us to avoid them because He loves us. God never piles on additional pain or grief in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose. He is not like that and does not need to be in order to accomplish His plan to save the World

One translation says, "Don't think higher of yourself than you ought to think." Well, how high is that? Paul doesn't say; he leaves it up to each person to figure out. What is too high for one person might not be for another. But make no mistake, there is plenty of pride to go around in humanity. We all kind of know how good, valuable, or capable we are to ourselves, others, and God. But notice also that Paul is not saying we need to think lowly of ourselves with some kind of poor, unhealthy self-image. This is why Paul so often emphasizes our oneness in Christ. When we find our identity in him, our self-image will be an accurate one, not too high or low. This yields a better life for us and all those around us!

Paul then gives additional thoughts on seeing ourselves realistically and accurately. *Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given you.* Oh, so we are to use our faith (given to us by God) to bring a measure of ourselves that's accurate and won't be overly high. By the way, I agree with people who say we need to “love ourselves” because we are made in God's own image and therefore we are of great value. To hate ourselves, or have low self-esteem, is very unhealthy, as is thinking too highly of ourselves. Paul always seems to keep a careful balance in all of this. Perhaps he remembered his extreme arrogance as a Pharisee, along with his fourteen years of thinking and learning from Jesus out in the desert, taught him everything he needed to know in order to exhort others. In his letter to the Philippians, he told his readers just about the same thing: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with all humility consider one another as more important than yourselves.”

You don't need to think of yourself as a piece of junk. Unfortunately, this is the kind of thinking that we, in the modern-day church, inherited from Augustine in the 5th century. He taught that all mankind is “totally depraved,” and that whoever God might send to hell forever is worthy of it, even if He decided to send everyone (which He could never do!) According to Augustine (and Calvin, who followed him theologically), if God let everyone go to hell, He'd be doing the right thing because that's what everyone deserves. The fact that He saves anybody at all, few as there might be, is gracious of Him. I was taught this all my life, and it took me 60 years to discover how wrong and unhealthy of a concept this is. We all *deserve* to be saved, not because of anything we have done to earn it, but because God loves us and we are in *need* of salvation!

I believe the opposite of *total depravity* is true. God *must* save everyone, not because anyone has earned it in any way, by either behavior or belief, but because we're so valuable having been

created by God in His very own image and likeness. We aren't junk to be thrown away like a used piece of toilet paper, or like a crusty old coat that's ragged, torn, and worthless! We are of great value to God. Not only are we worth saving, but we are creatures He so loves and cannot possibly want anything less for any of us.

And so, according to Paul, we are wise to not think any *higher* of ourselves than we should, because that's our tendency. But also, we shouldn't think *lower* of ourselves than we should, either, because we are of infinite value to God and we are all *new creations* in Christ, perfect in His sight, even though none of us fully realizes it. And so, now our minds (thinking) can and need to change.

10. We Are Just One of Many (Romans 12:4-8)

Members of each other (12:4)

Paul changes subjects here slightly. *Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body.* He does not mean Christ's physical body; he means the *body of believers*. Back in Paul's day, the collection of all believers in Jesus was called the "body of Christ." This was their way of expressing how Jesus moves about in the physical world after his resurrection and ascension, because they believed he dwelt in them through God's Spirit. Paul often referred to believers as having *Christ in them*, along with his parallel idea of them being *in Christ*. So we (believers) are the way that Jesus gets around in the world today! This allows him to be much more efficient and inclusive compared to when he was here 2000 years ago. Before Jesus departed from this world, he told his disciples that he would *send the Holy Spirit* to guide and comfort them.

The Father, Son, and Spirit are so closely connected that all are present in everything they do. Some in church history concluded that there is one God who *manifests* himself in three different ways, as a Father, as a Son, and as a Holy Spirit. This was their way of explaining how there can appear to be three distinct persons, yet only one God (who reveals himself in three different ways at different times). This is one of the earlier views of God that was popular before the 4th century, when a later

group of leaders concluded that it was not one God manifesting himself in three persons, but that the three (Father, Son, and Spirit) were three separate, distinct persons and not just three manifestations of one person, God, and that somehow these three persons, together, are one God. This is known as *trinitarianism*, which became the *required* belief and confession, imposed by church and state (the Roman emperor) in 381 AD at the Council of Constantinople. All other views of God were declared heresy, which is the official position of Catholic and most Protestant churches today. However, there has been a surge of re-examining this 4th-century trinitarian view of God in the last twenty or so years. It is an interesting study that I have looked into deeply, and it will be fascinating to see where it goes in the years ahead. The nature of God is very important, but it is also very mysterious. Perhaps it needs to remain that way, and we should not become overly dogmatic about things beyond our understanding, love each other fully, and trust God even if we do not understand His nature infallibly!

So we, as believers, are his body. We are his hands and feet. We are now the way he gets around in this material world. This makes sense, from a spiritual point of view. Paul explains this more: *We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.* One translation says we're "members of each other." I always thought that was fascinating because people think they become a member of an organization or institution. Well, they do, but this is not the kind of membership Paul is speaking of. Local church membership is necessary to protect the assets of the organization. This is why they have bylaws and membership requirements like affirming their doctrinal statement. People get their names on an official roll, place themselves under the authority of those local leaders, dedicate themselves to some kind of confessional creed, and then they are qualified to vote and determine the direction of that church. Nothing wrong with any

of this, but it is not the kind of *membership* expressed in the New Testament. *True* membership is something better, higher, and more spiritual. It is not man-made, but instead it is something God brings about through His Spirit.

The real membership is in the body of Christ, and we are “members of each other!” I’m a member of you, and you’re a member of me! That’s really cool. But, spiritually (where it counts), we’re not members of an institution, or of the pastor, or the board of Elders, or anything else. It’s good to have all these things, but that’s not what we’re members of. We’re members of each other because we’re members of the body of Christ, and we are the way God gets around in the world. What a privilege it is for God to entrust us with this.

Prophecy, serving, and teaching (12:6)

In His grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things. Paul’s going to get into this area of spiritual gifts, how the body works together, and how we need to appreciate each other. If God has given you the gift of prophecy, then speak out with as much faith as God has given you. Prophecy just means “to proclaim the truth.” It doesn’t mean to foretell the future, but sometimes it includes that. So go ahead and proclaim the truth according to your faith, no more and no less. Don’t make lofty claims that are not grounded in what you honestly believe, inconsistent with the faith God has given you. This is tricky business. Should we proclaim whatever we believe, no matter why we believe it, never looking into things carefully as Paul suggests elsewhere in his letters? Some people seem to do this. They become very dogmatic about whatever they believe, even though it stems from their upbringing, indoctrination at their church, or a strong personal conviction they have acquired. Yet, Paul seems not to place such restrictions on the gift of prophecy in this

passage. However, it seems wise, with this spiritual gift or any of the other ones, to always consider what Paul (and other New Testament writers) have to say elsewhere in the New Testament to temper our use of the gifts God has given us.

If your gift is serving others, then serve them well. A lot of people like serving others. That's good, and we need more of this. Jesus was a servant as much as he was anything else. Matthew and Mark, in their Gospel accounts, both record Jesus saying, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave. The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

But some people who try to serve can overdo it and drive other people nuts. When I was a young single guy, more than 50 years ago, I had a friend who always wanted to help other people. He would offer to take out the garbage for his girlfriend's mom, along with many other offers. It was kind of a *good-willed, constant drip*. I'm sure he believed he had the gift of serving, and he probably did. One day, the mom had to tell him, "No, Larry, go focus on my daughter. I'm doing fine. You're dating her, not me!" It was a bit of a strange response, but I think she didn't know how to tell him in any other way. He got the message, but just turned his serving actions elsewhere. Serving was just something inside of him; it was what he had to do; it was his gift. We all misuse our gifts in some way, but that's exactly how we learn to use them properly. And so, Paul tells those who serve to *serve well*. What does that mean? Well, like most truths in the Bible, it takes time and experimentation to figure things out. This is what life is all about; it's training and correction so we can become better people.

If you're a teacher, then teach well. Thanks, Paul. More vague exhortation? Yep! Again, it is up to us to seek what "doing

it well” means for each of us in our particular situations, according to how God made us. Paul really can’t be any more specific when writing to a general audience. But still, his words are a good guide. I think “doing things well” is all about paying attention to what we are doing, seeking God’s guidance, and monitoring how people respond so we can learn how to serve, teach, and exercise any God-given gift well.

Teaching is just imparting information. I’m teaching through this commentary and providing my readers with information. Hopefully, it is accurate, helpful, and encouraging, but it is up to each reader to do his or her homework and think things through carefully. My teaching is far from infallible, and not everything I teach is right for every reader. So always read discerningly! My goal is to give people *all* the facts and not just cherry-pick them in an attempt to get others to agree with me. However, I’m quite sure I fall far short of my own goal, but still, I try my best. Unfortunately, I have found that this is not a very popular idea at most churches. They each have an agenda that is essential to them (just as I have as a writer), and they tend to protect that agenda at all costs, even over ensuring that people get all the facts so they can each draw their own conclusions as God works in their lives. I have yet to find a church that I can go to and give people *all* the facts, because no matter what facts I give, they won’t like some of them because churches have a tendency to carefully craft a narrative that they believe in, and protect it tenaciously.

But that’s okay; we’re all like that to some degree. It’s part of *freedom of speech* that we all hold dear, and it includes *freedom of censorship*. All individuals and groups engage in this because there is always some limit (no matter how open they are) to what they will allow. In the case of churches, they realize that people vote and express their opinions with their feet and their wallets. It is just the nature of any gathering of people, and all anyone can do is be as honest, genuine, and fair-minded as possible. This is easier said than done. The bottom line is that every organization and

business must fight to exist and not go under; otherwise, why exist in the first place? So I am very sympathetic toward churches that do their best to balance teaching what they believe is true against being vital and successful. Often, these two are at odds with each other. I have been in church leadership and have witnessed, firsthand, how difficult this can be.

Encouraging and giving (12:7b)

If your gift is to encourage others, then be encouraging. Duh... seems obvious. But sometimes the obvious must be stated; sometimes people overlook it. People who encourage others can easily fail to encourage them. I think this is what Paul is getting at, and it may be the biggest problem encouragers face. Some people have the gift of encouragement. They don't teach anything. They don't serve. They don't give money. They are encouragers, and they just instinctively encourage people. That is a real gift, and they're not trying to tell people what to do or how to think; they just want people to do better in life and be more successful in their faith. Sometimes they encourage people by not saying anything at all; only being present.

The first time I was introduced to the idea of encouraging others was when I took my daughter and her friends to an outdoor Michael W Smith concert in the 90s. I remember him saying that he was an encourager, and that was one of his goals while performing. Since then, it has been one of my goals in life, though I have sometimes found it to be more difficult than I expected. In my heart, I want to see people get *all* the facts (not just a carefully selected few) so they can think things through for themselves and live according to accurate conclusions. What I did not expect was that not everyone sees such action on my part as encouraging. In fact, some have found it discouraging and have told me so. It took me quite some time to figure out why. It is because what encourages them most is not gaining the most

accurate information to make good decisions, but rather to have someone agree with them so that they feel affirmed in what they already believe. It was an ah-ha moment for me. Duh ... everyone does not think like me, nor should they. I was doing and saying things that would encourage me, helping me to sort out what is true in history, the Bible, and in life so I can live a better, confident life of faith. But that is not everyone's goal.

Looking back at my forty years of active involvement in several local churches, teaching, leading, helping, etc., I falsely assumed that everyone was "pursuing truth at all costs," and "following the facts wherever they lead." I was on a quest, since I was a young man, to find out what life was all about, who God is, and what He wanted. It took me all of those forty years, until I was about sixty, to discover that churches were not in that pursuit. Boy, am I a slow learner. Unfortunately, my naivety and wrong assumptions got me into big trouble that I did not anticipate or realize until it was too late. Once certain people form an opinion about you, even if it is a result of good intentions on your part, it is hard to correct such perceptions. The more I tried to explain, the more trouble I got into. It was like quicksand, where the more active you are, the quicker you go down. So, at some point, I quit wiggling, found a vine to grab, and pulled myself out. What a lesson, learning more about myself and others. But after fifteen years now to ponder on it and grow in knowing God, I am thankful for everything He allowed me to go through, in spite of all the pain of rejection by *some* loved ones, friends, and church leaders, because it was the best journey for me, custom-tailored by God, to bring me to where I am today. God always knows what He is doing; let Him do it, even when it's difficult!

If your gift is giving, give generously. More obvious exhortation from Paul, but it may be more profound than it appears. Don't be fooled by its simplicity. Sometimes the best advice is obvious and simple! Some people are givers. It's

amazing. Martin Luther was a giver. His poor wife had to endure him giving away everything, whatever anyone needed. I think he got this inspiration from the early church of the New Testament, as recorded in the *Acts of the Apostles*. There it says that “they had all things in common, giving to anyone who was in need.” Free-enterprise capitalists love to criticize communism and socialism, and they do so correctly, to some degree. It has been more often used to suppress people than to free them. Our Constitution guards against government control of personal property and liberty. I served in the Army and in Vietnam in the 60s as my way of helping to preserve these precious rights we have.

However, the kind of communism (community) and socialism (society) in the New Testament was not government-controlled, was voluntary, and was benevolent. Capitalism can, at times, be very selfish and greedy. Jesus was just about the polar opposite of such thinking. So we are wise to make sure that, in our self-governing society, we maintain a healthy balance of community-minded thinking and society-aware practices, and keep an eye out for the greed that can so easily take over. Never forget that one of the goals mentioned in the preamble of the US Constitution is promoting the *general welfare* of the population and not just acquiring wealth. The pursuit of money without including the well-being of all people is a recipe for greed and self-indulgence. There is no real peace or freedom in any of that. This is fully in line with all the teachings of Jesus and the New Testament writers, who always had the greater good for all in mind!

Giving can be overdone and wrongly distributed. Paul says to give *generously*, but we are also wise to think carefully about how and why we give. Perhaps Paul emphasizes generosity here because we all tend to be stingy. Believe it or not, it is possible for people to have too much money. But, of course, many who have acquired great wealth seldom see it as wrong in any way and often do not see the dangers in it. Paul warned about the danger of

desiring wealth in his first letter to Timothy, where he wrote, “Those who want to get rich easily fall into temptation and a trap, falling into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.” So the real danger of wealth is in making it too high a priority in life, seeking riches over seeking God. There are many people with great wealth who maintain a proper perspective about it, help others as needed, and seek God’s wisdom in how they live and give.

I think *true* giving is done as anonymously as possible so that no credit can be taken for it (God gets the glory) and prevents the person being helped from feeling embarrassed. For most people, getting financial help is very humbling; yet others scam the system to satisfy their never-ending greed and materialism. There have been winners of the lottery who look back and regret winning. One person I saw interviewed said that he won over a million dollars and began spending like it was endless. Easy come, easy go! When money is not earned, it dries up fast since its value is not appreciated. This guy also said that everyone extended him credit, and after he went through the original million, he ended up over a million in debt. That’s why he wished he had never won. It ruined his life.

There are *spiritual strings* attached to money for anyone who places God at the center of their life. When God grants us extra money gained in some way, even if it is honestly earned, there is a *stewardship* before God that accompanies the money. He does not give it without a purpose, nor without responsibility. It is our job to find out what that purpose is; otherwise, some kind of negative lesson is in store for us. Also, I have seen people become less dependent on God when someone unwisely gives them money. It may solve an immediate problem that God wants solved in some other way with different timing. This is why giving must be done wisely in addition to generously!

Leading and showing kindness (12:8b)

If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. No thanks. I don't want to be a leader ... in the traditional sense, where you've got to work through people problems, deal with politics, be lobbied by disgruntled members, have to always "grab the bull by the horns," and the buck stops with you! There are also many positive aspects to leadership and plenty of perks. Some people love that stuff, and God bless them for it; they are a special breed of human beings who are very much needed and appreciated. The leaders I have known don't love the politics that come with leading, but they don't hate it either, and they tolerate it well. But others seem to love it all just a little too much, giving the impression that it's all about them. In other words, there are all kinds of leaders, just as there are all kinds of people exercising their various spiritual gifts.

It is easy for anybody to think (especially teachers and leaders) that *their* gift is the most important one. Being the person up front that everyone is listening to can be intoxicating with the sense of power. They might think, "Because I'm up there in front every week, leading or teaching, I must have the most important gift." Actually, all gifted people could make this false claim because all gifts are essential, but they also need each other to function properly. For example, a good leader is also a servant. He or she leads *by* serving! Let me offer an analogy of a good servant-leader. Suppose you're going on a trip and this leader is driving the car. He or she basically has two choices. One is to say, "Buckle up, shut up, and I'll let you know when we get there." That represents one kind of leadership, and it is not all that uncommon.

The other kind is where the leader turns around and says, "Hey folks. Which route do you want to take? You want to take the scenic route or a faster one? Would you like to stop along the way? Just tell me where and for how long. I'm here to drive the

car, but I'm also here to serve you and make sure your needs are met." When you find a leader with this attitude and mindset, you've got a real leader. Look for them; they're out there! So a good leader takes responsibility seriously, but he or she does so humbly, and delights in serving, knowing this is the heart of Jesus.

If you have a gift for showing mercy and kindness to others, do it gladly. People who try to show kindness, but do it begrudgingly, ruin the whole purpose of showing kindness. Enjoy being kind to others. It is a joyous activity if you let it be. And, if God is in it (because He is in you), kindness will naturally come out of you. Don't think such nonsense as, "Okay, I've got to be kind to this person, so I'm going to *act* kind." It won't work because it will be an *act*. Only an active, genuine relationship with God will enable you to show mercy and kindness with a glad heart. All of the gifts come with cautions: Utter prophesy with faith; serve and teach well; encourage positively and give generously; lead seriously and show mercy gladly.

11. Genuine Love (Romans 12:9-13)

Genuine love (12:9)

Don't just pretend to love others...really love them! Go beyond kindness ... love people! And when you love people, make sure it's genuine. Really love them. Love is not just acting nice to somebody. It includes kindness, but love is so much more. The best definition of love that I know of is: "Acting in the very best interest of somebody else at your own inconvenience and expense." That's real love, and it goes beyond mere kindness. In fact, it even goes beyond *liking* someone. It is possible to *love* people we do not *like*! Sometimes we are required by God to do so, not because they have earned it in any way, just as we cannot earn God's love and salvation either. We are to love others because God first loved us, and He loved us "while we were still sinners" in rebellion against Him. (Remember how Paul started Romans Five in Volume 1 of this commentary?) And so, we must act in the best interest of others at our own loss and expense. Love is easy to understand, just hard to do. It goes against our selfish and fallen nature. We need to think, "I may not get anything out of this loving action I'm about to take, but I'm going to do it anyway because I know it's what God did for me."

Sometimes we have to take our time, settle in for the long haul, and act unselfishly, using our time, energy, and resources to help someone who may never appreciate it or make any positive

progress. If you've ever raised teenagers, you gotta love them in this way because they are still figuring life out and cannot fully appreciate or understand self-giving, unconditional love. I remember telling my daughter, at seventeen, when she was mad at me for limiting her in some way, "Honey, you can be mad at me now, but you're going to love the heck out of me when you're forty!" And today she does, having a 17-year-old daughter of her own.

So we love people, it's often hard to do, and it usually costs us something, emotionally or financially. Plus, they usually don't appreciate such love, and can't in the state they're in. That's exactly why they need someone to love them. This is how God sees us. We once had a cat who would bite me if I stopped petting her. It was not a mean bite, but it was a protest. My response was, "I'm not petting you anymore, cat. As soon as I quit, you get mad at me! How ungrateful." But aren't we like this often enough? Don't we respond to God sometimes in the same selfish way, when He's doing something ultimately good for us that we don't like at the moment? I also helped a homeless guy once, many years ago. I spent considerable time with him, helping him budget his very limited finances and buying him a few essentials (I never give out cash because it tends to get spent wrong). Before long, he grew demanding and unappreciative. I remember thinking, "I have loved and helped you, and this is your response?" But then I realized that what got him in this bind was also keeping him there. He was just a broken human being, like all of us in various degrees, in need of true love and kindness. So, I continued helping him, but I also shared with him how he was responding. He took it well and tried to work on it from then on. It also gave me a chance to explain what God's kind of love is all about, unconditional and self-sacrificing. I also told him my love fell short of this perfection, and that I needed to improve, too.

Hate what is wrong and hold tightly to that which is good. These last two verses, on love and hate, can save your life or make the difference between a good life and a miserable one. Paul then adds this: *Love each other with genuine affection and take delight in honoring each other.* Here, Paul restates what it means to truly love each other: to delight in and honor one another.

Living sacrifices

In this last part of Paul's letter (Romans 12-16), Paul is presenting what should *result* from his *explanation* of the *solution* that solves humanity's *problem*. Another way to put it is "how then shall we live?" This was the title of a book by Francis Schaeffer in the mid 70s. In it, he traces the decline of societies since the fall of Rome, through the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, up into the modern era. There was also a documentary movie made. Schaeffer was asking, "Hey, because of what happened with Christ on the cross and the huge influence Christianity has had on the world since then, how then should we live?" Although Paul is writing much earlier in history, I think he is basically asking the same question here in this last part of his letter.

As you may recall, Paul started this final part of his letter with these words: "Based on everything I have told you so far, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a *living* sacrifice, the kind God will find acceptable." A living sacrifice (that is, our lives) is such a better kind than sacrificing animals in some symbolic way that accomplishes nothing of any real substance. I don't believe for a second that when you take an animal, cut it up and get blood everywhere, that God's saying, "Oh, isn't this great! This really pleases me." I don't think he's into that. He has much higher and

better plans for us, things that really make a difference in our lives. This is why it is a “living” sacrifice that God wants. It’s for our benefit, not His.

Israel attempted to *appease God* because all they knew was sacrificing something valuable, like an animal. But they eventually went too far and started literally sacrificing their precious babies. What kind of religious con job was fostered on these mothers to convince them to give up their babies, whom they carried for nine months and had become emotionally bonded with? Do you see any kind of religious con jobs in the church today? They may not be as dramatic as what Israel did, but they exist today in various forms. Like Israel, the modern-day church is unaware of many ways in which it harms those it is supposed to be helping.

God brought judgment on Israel because of this horrific practice, which they inherited from the pagan nations around them. The place where they carried out these human sacrifices was called *The Valley of the Son of Hinnom*, a piece of land just south of Jerusalem. Today it is a beautiful park! But at one time, it was a place where God brought judgment down on Israel through other invading nations, who killed many of the Jews. There were so many bodies, they started piling them up and had to burn them to prevent the smell and diseases. Thus, it became a place where garbage was burned for several hundred years until Jesus came on the scene. It was known as *Gebenna* (“Valley of Hinnom”), and so for the Jews in the days of Jesus, *Gebenna* became a metaphor for punishment in the afterlife. When Jesus used this term (Gehenna), I don't think he was agreeing with them about their metaphorical view of some kind of punishing hell. I think he was talking their language, so to speak. On one occasion, Jesus told the Jews that they were “Sons of Gehenna,” turning the tables on them and their perverted view of a historical place of judgment.

On another occasion, Jesus used their idea of Gehenna as a way to tell them they would be better off plucking out their eye (or cutting off a body part) than to keep on sinning and be thrown

into such a place of burning judgment. I don't think he meant it literally; he was speaking hyperbolically (as he often did) to make a point, using ideas they were familiar with (like Gehenna). This is probably why only Jesus mentions Gehenna (often mistranslated as *hell* in modern translations), and does so only five times, on four occasions (not counting repetitions of the same events in the gospels). The only exception is that James uses the idea of Gehenna to express how foul and dangerous the human tongue is. But he does not in any way warn his readers that Gehenna is someplace people go to if they sin too much or fail to believe

God clearly prefers *living* sacrifices over *dead* ones. Trying to appease God by killing animals in acts of violence comes out of the heart of humans who misunderstand God's desires, intentions, and good design for humanity. But God let this violent, less-than-best kind of sacrificial system play out in the Old Testament, for hundreds of years, so that the record of the insufficiency of such sacrifices would be well established before Jesus came to reveal who God really is and what He wants. Think of the contrast Jesus brought as he came and revealed the heart of the Father, and how we can commune with God the same way that Jesus did, living life with Him and learning from Him, enjoying life, and always becoming a better person. The New Testament presents Jesus as one who grew in wisdom and in favor with God and man, yet was tempted in all things, and even had to learn obedience. This makes him very much like us, yet somehow far beyond us as an example. What he passed on to us is his special, perfect relationship with His Father, which we so desperately need. John, in his Gospel account, reported Jesus as inviting us to come and be one with him in the same way that he is one with the Father. Wow, if this is possible, it's got to be the best news any of us could hear. This is all that is intended by God to come of being a living sacrifice, as opposed to just performing

symbolic dead sacrifices that are far inferior, and possibly worthless except for the contrast it provides for us.

This is truly the way to worship God, as Paul stated at the beginning of Romans Twelve. True worship is not going to a place and offering sacrifices (for the ancients) or performing various rituals (for modern-day religious people). Instead, it is giving your daily life to God, in service to Him and others. Today, we tend to gather in institutional settings where hundreds of people show up, sit in rows, and look past the backs of people's heads as someone preaches a sermon. There is nothing wrong with any of this, and to the degree that it helps people love God and love others, then it's a good thing. But that's not *true* worship. True worship is living *for* God and *with* Him daily, enjoying fellowship with Him in an abundant life that affects others in a positive way (and, as you are encouraged, also by them).

Along with many other people I know, I see life as a 24/7 worship service. If I wake up in the middle of the night, I'm worshipping. It's really a 24/7 prayer vigil cause I'm praying all the time. I don't open and close my prayers with prescribed verbiage. I'm just talking to God. It is that simple, and it's all He wants. There may be times to get on our knees, instinctively, but God does not require it. It's all about fellowship with God, abiding in Him, and experiencing His presence in the best and worst of times! Of course, there are moments when I fall back into some kind of sin, missing the mark before God in some way. I can get angry at somebody or become self-centered and lose my bigger perspective that always includes God. When I catch myself, I change my focus back on God. This is what *repentance* means. It does not mean to *feel sorry*, although that might be included sometimes. God only wants us to repent (turn back to him, change our mind and heart) because it is best for us. I'm doing a lot better at this than I did 20-30 years ago, and probably you are too. We all grow in knowing who God is and who we are. This is always God's goal for us, and it's a good one.

So, according to Paul, true worship is being a living and holy sacrifice, and not copying the behaviors and customs of this world, trying to appease a God who does not require such nonsense. It is letting God *transform* you into a new person by changing the way you think. What needs to change isn't God. God's attitude toward us doesn't need to change; it's already good. It's always been good. It will always be good, even toward the worst sinner, because He loves everyone infinitely, completely, and unconditionally. What needs to change is us, our mind, our disposition toward God. And when we finally change, God doesn't say, "Okay, I'll start liking you now." Instead, He says, "Welcome home, my child. I already liked you. I already loved you. Welcome home. Glad you figured it out." And someday everybody will come home, in their time and in God's.

When God transforms us into *new persons* by changing the way we think, that is when we discover God's will for us, which is good, pleasing, and perfect.

Work hard and never be lazy (12:11)

Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. The word *hope* in the New Testament does not mean, "I hope things will somehow work out." Instead, it means "overwhelming confidence." We are to rejoice in the overwhelming confidence we have in who we now are in Christ. It is a great place to be; it's the best place to be. Perhaps Paul is warning us that laziness (which we are all susceptible to) is a big hindrance to rejoicing in the hope we already have from God. It can rob us of experiencing God fully, not that He is goofing off in any way, but that we are. The contrast Paul gives to laziness, and perhaps the cure, is to serve God. There is no higher calling in life, and nothing is more fulfilling. Though serving God mostly involves you and Him, it also very much includes serving others. We serve God by serving

others. Jesus once said, “When you have done such things to the least among you, you have done it to me!”

We all have trouble in our lives. It is unavoidable. It is how we *respond* to it, rather than just *react*, that counts. It's important to be patient with ourselves and others. At my age, I often think, “Man, this *getting old* thing is getting old.” Someday, when you get old, you're gonna need all the patience and wisdom you can conjure up in life. In some ways, life settles down as we age. It is not going up and down all over the place like it does when we're raising kids, working, and trying to build a future. But in other ways, it is harder. Health issues only increase, and these are a challenge. Trust me, you cannot have learned too much patience and wisdom, so let yourself learn these well as you travel down life's road, letting God work in you, sometimes in very frustrating ways. Consider it all training and preparation for enduring your later years in life. With wisdom and patience, old age can become a sweet walk with God, daily, knowing He will never leave or forsake you, no matter what!

So be patient in trouble and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Watch for it. It will be there. Help people the best you can, but you can't help everybody. I had to learn that if God has not directly involved me in somebody's life, they are probably not my assignment, and God will bring someone else to help them. I don't have to go around and stick my nose into everybody's business and try to fix them. That's what engineers, like me, tend to do. God does not want everything fixed now and fixed in my way. Instead, just be ready to help people when you see the need because it'll come your way. And usually, you will know when it's somebody you can talk to or help as needed. Paul ends this section appropriately with: *Always be eager to practice hospitality.*

12. Live in Harmony (Romans 12:14-18)

Bless Your Persecutors (12:14)

Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them. Oh, that's hard to do. We all want to strike out against those who oppose us and dwell on it in our minds. But all we do is give them space in our thinking; free real estate. When we do, they start to own us. If people are persecuting you, don't curse them, says Paul. Instead, he says, *Pray that God will bless them.* That's a tough one. The last thing we want is for them to be blessed. But praying for their blessing is the best thing we can do for ourselves, because it changes *our* hearts. What we really want to pray is, "God, stick it to them. Change them. Fix them. Get them to quit harassing me." That's what we want, and it's an *honest* prayer, but it's not the *best* prayer. Instead, hard as it is to do, pray that God will bless them, that they'll do better in life. Isn't this what we ultimately want, since if they do better in life and with God, they won't need to persecute us? The best way for them to quit bothering you is for them to be blessed by God and gain a new life. Always get a bigger perspective in life, one that includes God and all He is doing, and life will go better for you.

Be happy with those who are happy. Weep with those who are weeping. Our tendency is to help people be happy and escape their troubles. Generally, that is a good desire, but God has His

timing and purpose in our struggles. So sometimes we just need to shut up and weep with someone weeping so they are not alone. Our tears are not for ourselves, but for them. Our day of sorrow is both coming and has already passed, so we know what they are going through. Until God brings an answer in His time, we need only to be there *with* them and *for* them. The day will come when the sorrow is over, and we will share in their happiness. Be ready and willing to go either way with people, laugh or cry, and don't try to fix them ahead of God's appointed time.

Sometimes people are down. You want to lift them up and make them feel good, but often you need to weep with them because they won't feel good about their situation anytime soon. You gotta remember what it was like when you were there and didn't want to hear somebody talking about positive things when it didn't match how you felt. Go ahead and weep with them or be silent with them like Job's friends were for seven days and nights. After that, they kinda blew it, talking too much, accusing too much, and judging Job. Don't do that either! This does not mean you shouldn't present anything positive, nor give the person any hope. Just be careful how you do it. Your body language may say more than your words. People will always let you know, indirectly, when they are ready for answers and hope. It can take time; hang in there with them!

Live in harmony with each other. That's another tough one, and the closer people are to you, the harder it is to be in harmony with them. Have you noticed that you can more easily be in harmony with acquaintances than family members? Meet people at the coffee shop, have a nice long visit, and things can end well almost every time. That's because you don't live with them and you're all on your best behavior. This is impossible to do 24/7, and so those closest to us feel the brunt of our humanity because they know us too well.

When you live with a roommate, or spouse and kids, or take care of your parents, where you rub shoulders constantly, it's hard to live in harmony because it cramps your style, and they do annoying things. But guess what? We do annoying things also. We're just as annoying to them. So, in these situations, it is much harder to live in harmony with each other. All the more reason to be walking close to God in life, keeping that big perspective only He can give, and love people as you realize how much God loves you in spite of your flaws.

Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. This is a problem sometimes seen at church. There are always people in leadership, and there are some people who want to be around them for various reasons. Some want to be in the *in crowd*; some want to be *in the know* about things. It's kind of humorous to watch, but understandable. This is true in any organization. But go ahead and let yourself enjoy the company of the *little guys*, who appear to be nobodies. They aren't really, but it looks that way in light of all the goings on by the "movers and shakers," who are more outgoing, but not necessarily more interesting. Sometimes, quiet people who hang out on the sidelines are more interesting. They often have untapped hidden resources and quality traits lacking in those who work their way to the top. Look for these, and you will find them.

I learned this in homeless shelters. It is easy to think, at first glance, that homeless people are just out of it and don't have anything going on in life. But a lot of them are brilliant. A lot of them are talented. They have artistic and musical abilities. Or, they have experiences and stories that rival any leader you could ever hang out with. The other thing I discovered about homeless people is they're very savvy. Many have lived on the street for years; they know what's going on, they understand human nature, they've got their antenna up, and it's actually hard to fool them. They know genuine love when they see it, so patronizing them

does not work. They usually see it and tolerate it to get the free food being offered. They can spot a phony from a mile away. They are happy to come and get a meal from phony people who seek to be known as great helpers of the disadvantaged, but they know who genuinely loves them and cares about them. It is those who spend time *with* them, not those who spend money *on* them!

So Paul says, “Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people,” or people who seem like they don't have much going for them, but they do. You can learn a lot from people who you think wouldn't know a lot. You'd think the smart people who are lawyers and doctors know more. Well, they know more about their profession than most people, but do they really know about life? To what degree does their status in life prevent them from learning all they can? Most of them have had it so good for so long, I wonder if they really know what life's all about. Hey, I wonder about myself, too, since I have had it pretty good my whole life. I always pray that God will teach me what I need to know in whatever way He deems best.

There was a politician who ran for national office many years ago, and he had a car elevator in his garage. He also made a statement once: “If you want to make it in life, all you gotta do is go borrow from your parents and start a business.” He said that because that's what he did. I couldn't help but think that this guy shouldn't be in charge of anything important that affects people's lives. He needs to just keep running his wealth-producing business where he is best suited. He lost the election in which he was engaged. Sometimes people who seem to have everything also seem to know very little. So often, the ordinary, quiet people at church might be a lot more interesting than you think. You might even be one yourself. If so, count your blessings.

And don't think you know it all. Okay. Nobody likes a know-it-all. If you think you know it all, there's still one thing you don't know ... how little you really know.

Live at peace with all people (12:17)

Never pay back evil with more evil. Why? Well, for one thing, when you get into that mindset, you're giving people free rent in your mind and heart. If you want to pay back more evil to them with the evil they've done to you, you're going to be dwelling on them, and they'll emotionally own you. You'll be sitting at home at night thinking about how you're gonna get back at them and what you will say next time you see them. Then what? Soon, they will dominate all your thoughts and feelings. It's a lousy way to live and a trap that is hard to escape.

Here is Paul's solution: *Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.* Now they might not actually see it, but conduct your life in a way that they *can* see it, that you're being honorable. Even when they do not see it, it is the right thing to do and the best guard against the misery that comes from engaging in payback. They also may see it, and get it, and not acknowledge it or tell you about it because they don't want to give you that ground. But do it anyway. Always do things in such a way that everyone can see you're honorable. Sometimes we do things in an honorable way, but it doesn't work out, and it leads to more trouble than if you had just faked it. Sometimes being honest will cost you something financially, emotionally, or in stature. But that's okay. It is never right to do wrong in order to do right. *Why* we do things is just as important as *what* we do.

Do all that you can to live in peace with other people. This is a gem of a verse and has kept me out of a lot of trouble over the years. You might not be able to do this perfectly, but make sure you're doing everything you can on your end to live at peace with other people. I keep seeing people on Facebook, many of whom are professed believers, and they write vicious stuff toward

other people, often toward people on the other side of their ideology, political party, religion, or whatever. I saw a post the other day from a pastor who put a picture of someone outside of his moral comfort zone making a derogatory statement about them, letting everyone know he was opposed to their lifestyle. For him, it represented why the world is in such bad shape today. I typed back and asked, “Do you love this person unconditionally, the way God loves you and me? Do you even know someone living this lifestyle? Would you be willing to be friends with them even though you disagree?” No response from him was posted. I hope he thought about it.

Notice that Paul does not say we are to be at peace with everyone. That is impossible. He only says to be at peace within our ability and control. Also, keep in mind that we can be at peace with people even if we don’t agree with them. There’s a reasonable limit to this, but we can do a lot on our end without compromising what we believe. In other words, we need not go out of our way to act dishonorably, or to pay back evil with evil. It is easy for Christians to become self-righteous, annoying, noisy gongs, as Paul expressed in First Corinthians 13, his famous chapter where he spells out what love is and is not.

13. Never Take Revenge (Romans 12:19-21)

Leave it up to God (12:19)

Dear Friends, *never take revenge*. King Arthur said, in the movie Camelot, “Oh, revenge, the most worthless of all causes.” The movie ends on a note that proves that statement to be true. *Leave that to the righteous anger of God*. God gets angry, but He does so rightly. In other words, it is perfect anger with a perfect purpose. It is not the petty, selfish kind of anger that we humans exercise. God’s anger is always rooted in His love, as are all of his attributes and actions. The ultimate motive in God is always His infinite love. Anger is not his motive, nor is justice, judgment, or punishment. These are all *results* flowing from His love, just as mercy, salvation, grace, and restoration do. There is always something that motivates God to do what He does, and that grand motive is His love, which is God acting in the very best interest of those He loves.

So when Paul says for us to leave any revenge to the righteous anger of God, he is saying that we will carry out revenge in a selfish, petty manner, and only God can do it right. And what is the greatest, most complete, most accomplishing kind of revenge that God, in His love and righteous anger, could possibly execute?

God's kind of *revenge* can only have an ultimately good purpose. It cannot be self-serving retaliation of some kind that never meets the objectives of His love that motivates Him. In other words, God's revenge must act in the very best interest of the humanity He created and so loves. If you want to think of revenge as "getting back at someone" for wrongdoing (since that's how we as humans see it), then it's fair to ask, "How would God ultimately *get back* at us for our wrongdoing, in light of His love?" Well, it seems like the ultimate revenge, and therefore the ultimate *getting back* at someone, would be to completely annihilate that person as a wrongdoer! And that is exactly what God does; that is His kind of revenge. He completely annihilates us as the *old person* of sin that we once were and makes us into the *new person* we now are in Christ. The old person is gone forever. Now that is ultimate revenge. Want to get back at someone for wrongdoing? Change them into a right-doer. That's what love does, and it is infinitely better than the petty idea of sending people to hell forever, which accomplishes nothing for the poor, lost sinner. God would never stoop to such nonsense. He is always magnanimous.

Man's level of revenge is, "I'm gonna get back at you for what you did to me," and of course, we impose that on God and think He's a vengeful, retaliating being because that's who we are. He is far above all that. God is rightly angry about our wrongdoing and sin, but it is because He loves us. His righteous anger that's rooted in His love makes Him want to get rid of all the crap in our lives so we can live eternally with Him in real freedom. So we need to leave revenge to God, where it belongs, and let it be executed rightly and lovingly, because He has His own kind of revenge, and it's not like ours.

Yes, God is going to get back at us (carry out His revenge) against us as fallen creatures by changing us and rescuing us from all that's destroying us, bringing us into a wonderful relationship with Himself, causing us to be *reborn* into the image of Christ. Think about it, even for us as selfish, fallen creatures, what would

be the best way to get back at someone who wronged us? Would it be to lock them up? Would that be best? Would it be to torment them forever? What good purpose would that accomplish, and what kind of person would it show us to be? No better than them! The very best way for even us as selfish humans to get back at someone (exercise revenge) would be to make them go away forever by totally converting them into a true and faithful friend, loving each other! They would no longer exist as someone who would oppose or wrong us. That would be the ultimate revenge, and that is what God does, nothing less.

For God to let people stay in a fallen state of being, unchanged, angry in hell forever, and flipping Him off every day is no solution. In fact, it is cruel to have created them in the first place, knowing they would fall into sin, and then failing to save them, or worse, tormenting them forever! That would not be any kind of success on God's part and would be a great failure, given that His clear goal was to save the whole world through the coming of His Son, who gave His life for all humanity.

Love your enemies (12:20)

Instead, if your enemies are hungry, feed them. You don't have to exercise revenge on them. If they're thirsty, give them something to drink. You don't need to cause them to die of thirst. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads. Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good. This seems to support the fact that God's kind of payback isn't like ours. His is: "I'll pay you back for sinning, I'll get rid of your sin, I'll die on the cross for you, I'll take it away, and I'll give you a heart of flesh instead of a heart of stone. I'll change your mind, I'll change your heart, and I'll get you to the point where you confess that Jesus is Lord and kneel before me willingly to say, 'Wow, what a wonderful God you are!' That's

how I'll pay you back, by getting rid of the horrible, sinful, destructive person that you used to be.”

Paul uses two basic human needs to illustrate God's infinite love, compassion, caring, and rescue qualities. Pay back (exercise revenge) your hungry and thirsty enemies (not just your friends) by meeting their needs, disregarding how they may have mistreated you. This is the magnanimous nature of God. He does not engage in petty tit-for-tat that we do out of selfishness. There is nothing selfish about God. He always makes it all about us, even when we are His enemies.

This is the bottom line. If you let your own evil tendencies conquer you, they will own you. That person you hate and withhold food and water from to get back at them will take up space in your mind and heart. You'll be absorbed by it. So “don't let evil conquer you,” says Paul, “but conquer evil by doing good,” because that is what God does. He conquers evil with good; that's His kind of revenge. We'll only do good if we're genuinely walking with God. Acting like you're doing good when you don't really want to; that won't work. If you're telling yourself, “I gotta be good to this person because that's what the Bible says to do,” that's not genuine. It might be mildly helpful in some situations, but not all that effective. You have to truly love people, and the only way you'll love them is by seeing how much God loves you. As Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians, “Forgive other people because you realize how much God has forgiven you!” Also, “We are to love others because God first loved us,” according to John in his first letter.

Sometimes we can love people by giving them space. I have a counselling friend who calls this *grace space*. Just be there with them, even with your enemies, if they will allow it. Protect that space for them. Doing this would solve half the problems in this life, maybe more. Give your kids space, give your spouse space, shut up, and just be there for them. This can be done long-distance; you need not be present. People know what kind of

disposition we have toward them, much more than we realize. Somebody once said, “God gave you two eyes, two ears, and one mouth ... and he put a door on it!” This is part of God’s design to take in more than we give out verbally. Hey, we have two hands and two feet; all the better to serve others without much talk! Proverbs says, “Even a fool, when he is silent, is considered to be wise.

Heaping burning coals

Burning coals heaped on the head? What’s this all about? Sounds like some kind of nasty vengeance, but it isn’t. Paul says, “By doing this (giving food and water to your enemies), you’ll heap burning coals of shame on their heads.” What does he mean? Well, since Paul didn’t write a commentary on his letter to the Romans (or any other letter), all we can do is look at those who have researched the practices and culture of that day and see if it sheds any light. What we know for sure, based on the immediate context, is that Paul’s idea of heaping coals on someone’s head is not intended to hurt them, only to shame them. Big difference. Trying to shame someone with our tongue usually does not work. But if we do something, especially if it is something good towards someone else, this can bring great shame without speaking a word. And, it is intended to help them, not harm them.

One commentary I read said that the practice of heaping coals on the head of another was a way of giving them coal (carried in a container on their head) that would be used to keep them warm, cook, and do other good things. It was akin to giving water and food, meeting the basic needs in life. My counselling friend said that her mother taught her as a little girl to “always repay somebody who does something bad to you with something good; you just rise above it. You don’t need to do anything bad to them. You just leave it be, and you will end up heaping burning

coals on their head.” Another friend told me that he believes that *fire* in the Bible represents God's passion and His purifying love. Many, if not most passages in the Bible having to do with fire are positive in nature, despite its destructive qualities. Isaiah put burning coals on his lips (metaphorically) to purify his speech, having declared himself “a man of unclean lips.” Elsewhere in the Bible, fire is used to purify gold, and therefore, our lives are purified by fiery trials.

How powerful is kindness? It appears weak, but it is not. It works slowly but very powerfully. Acting in kindness usually does not accomplish much in the short term, but when done repeatedly, it adds up in the mind and heart of the recipient. Fiery coals heaped on the head of an enemy to help him meet his basic needs in life cannot be easily ignored. At first, he may think you to be stupid and a sucker. But keep on doing it, and in due time, he will sense an imbalance in the situation where you are giving good things, and he is only doing harm. There are a few people in this world so evil and void of any conscience that this will never be effective. Most people will eventually break and see real love for what it is (something they do not possess). It is, effectively, looking at them with love and saying, “I have chosen to return good in response to your evil.” They cannot help but ponder why, especially since they know this is something they would never do.

Stephen, when he was stoned, looked up and said, “I see the heavens opening and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” He didn't worry about how he would escape that horrible experience. He was ready for God to take him home. He was showing that he wasn't afraid of death, snatching away from his persecutors any chance of victory in what they were doing. He was not responding in anger or fear, but demonstrating his kindness toward them (in the only way he could show it), pointing to God as the only answer for him and them. The young man who held the cloaks of those who were doing the stoning was most likely Paul (when he was still Saul, the most zealous

Pharisee, persecuting Christians in those early days before his conversion). This may have been the first crack in his armor, leading him to see Jesus as his long-awaited Messiah and savior. Stephen could not have known what impact his simple kindness and loyalty to God would bring about.

Good reasons for responding right

I think there are two important things that happen when we return good for evil. One thing is that we don't get pulled into evil thinking or become absorbed by it. Evil can be contagious, and when someone acts in an evil way toward us, we can instinctively respond in kind and try to counter their evil actions with one of our own. This can become a vicious cycle and even a lifestyle without realizing it. I see this in politics all the time, not by everyone, but by many. The hatred and vicious name-calling escalates as time goes on, where people seem to have lost any sense of civility, doing and saying things that if they could step back for a moment and see themselves objectively, they would be horrified or at least embarrassed. They would severely discipline their own kids for such behavior and speech if they saw it in them. Like the proverbial frog in the pot, some people get caught up in returning evil for evil and do not know how to break the cycle, nor want to. But the solution is simple, even if it is not easy: return good for any evil received.

The other important thing that happens when we return good for evil is the eventual effect such behavior can have on others. The person you are responding to with good is influenced, even though they don't realize it, or won't admit it if they do. They won't say a thing. But they can't help but go away and think, "What the heck just happened? This is so out of the ordinary. This person's either crazy or they're on to something good because I expected them to come back with anger, just as I would." I experienced this once, many years ago. I got called in

by the leaders of a church to give an account for some honest changes in my beliefs I had made (changes I had to make to maintain my personal integrity). I didn't like it, but I didn't mind either, since they were just doing their job as honestly as they could before God. I had chosen to get involved over the years at that church, and so talking things out seemed to be a reasonable thing to do. I didn't respond to them in any kind of anger or fight them in any way. I let them ask questions, and I tried to answer as honestly, briefly, and clearly as I could. They certainly deserved an answer, and the New Testament exhorts believers to "always be ready with an answer to anyone who asks, giving a reason for the hope that lies within you."

But strangely enough, they soon became a bit frustrated and impatient, which reached the point of them saying, "You need to bring your arguments against what we believe and where we differ." They were annoyed that I was being too loving and passive, but I was trying to be compliant and respectful. Somehow, I knew not to be pulled into their anger and frustration, and not respond in kind, but to respond kindly, which I did. I told them, "I have no need to fight you in any way, nor do I want to. I love you guys (all of whom I have known for a long time, some of them for 40 years) and just want to be at peace with you, together before God whom we all trust." This, without me realizing it, made them feel an imbalance. I was not trying to take some higher ground to shame them in any way; I was just doing what was in my heart, trying to love them and find common ground with them before God. I wouldn't have done this when I was 40; I had to be over 60 to love like this, having walked with God so many years, and learning what real love is. It seemed the more I loved them, the angrier some of them became. My response to that was, "Gee, I need to love these guys even more." So I did, but that seemed only to exaggerate the imbalance they felt. It was quite an experience for me, but it taught me the power of love and kindness, and returning good, no matter how people

treat you. By responding this way, over time, things settled down, and the crisis passed without any other conflict. I stayed at that church and attended with my wife for another 15 years until we were unable to attend due to health limitations. I wanted to keep on communicating my love for them, no matter how long it took. I have no doubt that I did not handle this difficult situation perfectly, but I do know that Paul's principle of responding in kindness during a conflict was the right thing to do.

Responding in love is always the right thing to do, even if you do it imperfectly. It is for sure the right direction to take. It works really well. Both the person doing the loving and the person being loved benefit. You can't lose, except for losing things that really do not matter in life. It might take a while for your love to be effective, but eventually it will be in God's time and way. Hey, God may never reveal the results to you, but go ahead and do what you know is right. Everyone will always be better off. They might not come back and say, "Oh boy, that was so great of you. You were so kind to me. Thank you so much," but I guarantee they'll notice your love, and then God can go do something with it in His time and in His way. And, even if he doesn't, it doesn't really matter. Our job is just to do what's right and give it all to God. Have you ever experienced the peace that comes with doing this? There is nothing else like it in life, even if it comes with some great loss of things that do not really matter. Don't miss out!

14. Respect Civil Authorities (Romans 13:1-3)

Introduction

In Romans Thirteen, we're going to encounter some controversial subjects. There's a lot to argue about, discuss, agree, or disagree; it's tricky. But it's tricky for a different reason than the doctrinal problems in the *explanation* part of Paul's letter (Romans 4-11), like what we encountered in Romans 5 and 9. Here, in this last part of Paul's letter, he presents the *results* of our salvation in Jesus. And so the kinds of controversies he presents are more *practical* in nature rather than doctrinal. He's going to start out with "everyone must submit to governing authorities." Wow! Depending on where you are on the political spectrum, that could be a challenge.

But first, let me say a few things about how best to interpret the New Testament. This has everything to do with how you will deal with these controversial passages. Here is a range of views that people hold about the New Testament writings. Some people see the Bible (and therefore the New Testament) as the *very Word of God*. For them, when it speaks, God speaks. The idea is that if God were in the room right now and talking on a particular subject in the Bible, he would say exactly what is said by those who were its authors. In other words, they are speaking for God, saying what He wants said, but doing so in their own words, which God *inspired* them to write. If this sounds a bit hazy, it's

because it is. By their own admission, no one who believes in the *inspiration of scripture* understands it fully. They see it as a mystery, but one they believe to be true. It is also common for these same people (usually Roman Catholics and Evangelical Protestants) to believe the Bible is infallible and inerrant (without any errors). For them, it is exact and correct right down to every “jot and tittle” (vowel markings in the Hebrew language), verb tenses, and word choices. As a result, the accepted collection of New Testament writings (determined in the 4th century, some 300 years after they were written) is exalted to a very high level, maybe higher than they should be, but to people who hold this view, it can't be too high since it is *God's word*. That view is on one end of the spectrum.

At the other end, the most extreme view held by non-believers and secular people is that the Bible is crazy talk, ridiculous, and a bunch of religious mumbo jumbo. But then, in between these extremes are people who see the Bible as a record of what Christians believed 2000 years ago, which they wrote down as letters, Gospels, historical narratives, and apocalyptic presentations about future events. They wrote things about Jesus. They wrote what he taught. They wrote letters to each other. One author wrote a travel log of the missionary journeys of Paul while traveling with him. These writings were copied, collected, and preserved for the benefit of future generations and are very helpful and instructive. Hey, these writings are from the very followers of Jesus in the years after his life, death, and resurrection. They're very useful for historians to sort out what happened.

However, there are many opinions stated in these writings. But that is okay, it makes them real. People always express their opinions and convictions when they write. Why else would they write? Some were true historians attempting to set the record straight. Others were expressing what they experienced, including what they claim to be special revelations from God. Some things

written down are cultural situations of that day and may not apply as much to us today as they did back then. Other things seem to be timeless principles that apply to all people, everywhere, in all generations.

Some hold a looser view of the Bible, seeing it more as a human production than one by God. They do this in opposition to those who see it as nothing less than the absolute *Word of God*. No one can say for sure or prove who is right or wrong, but this does not stop people from holding their view tenaciously, to which they have full rights. I think it's a highly personal thing where each person has to read what is written and think it through based on upbringing, current influential environments, and any spiritual experiences. The point is that how you read the New Testament, how you take it, how you interpret it, will have everything to do with how you incorporate these writings into your life, if at all.

For example, when Paul starts out Romans Thirteen with, “everyone must submit to governing authorities,” that's a pretty strong statement for anyone to read. But here is a good question to ask that can only be answered by how you view the New Testament writings. Is Paul saying: “You'd better submit to governing authorities?” Is he commanding, or is he saying, “Hey, let's get real. Everybody's under some government control, and everybody must live with their demands. You don't have much choice.” So is he giving a command, or is he just stating the obvious? We start out with having to interpret what Paul writes in the very first verse. Paul didn't write a commentary and tell us what he was thinking, but we have the rest of the chapter to consider, and maybe that will help us understand what he means. Perhaps you can see how easy it is to conclude either way: commands or information. There are many religious people who believe the Bible (including the New Testament) is like a rule book. When you read it, you must do and believe everything it says, exactly, without watering it down in any way. It becomes

their *ultimate rule book*, and what it says is what they must do. Nothing wrong with this view, it is very popular, and if it works for them in their lives, then this is exactly how they should read and live.

So somebody of this mindset might read this verse and conclude that everyone must submit to governing authorities and feel justified in trying to impose this on everyone. However, if you look elsewhere in the New Testament, there were times when the followers of Jesus defied the governing authorities and told them to get lost. They would say things like, “You can send us to jail, but we're not going to bow down to you or any other lord except Jesus.” This demonstrates the importance of reading any passage, not only in the immediate context (surrounding verses) but also in the greater context of the whole New Testament. There is always a reasonable, practical aspect in all of Paul's writings, and as we work through them, I will point out what they are. Here is the big question to ask: Is Paul just giving out a bunch of rules, or is he teaching us *principles* that we need to be aware of that will help us live better?

Authority is from God (13:1)

So he starts Romans Thirteen with this: *Everyone must submit to governing authorities for all authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God.* Those are pretty strong words. It makes it sound like God and the government are in complete harmony, but they're not. I think we all know they're not. So is Paul overstating something, or is he just giving a general principle? You have to think this through as we work through this passage. It's true that all authority comes from God. Those in positions of authority have been placed there by God. Does this mean they are always Godly and perfect? Of course not. They are not God, though

some of them act that way sometimes. Does God really place them there? Every time we have an election, I watch carefully, and there are good people on both sides, many who are religious and believe this passage. The religious people on both sides often think that whoever gets elected, especially when it is who they voted for, that God put that person there. Well, He did, but not because they are perfect. God always has a purpose, even if it is to teach people to be careful who they elect. Barack Obama may have been placed there by God because He wanted to bring some help to people who needed health insurance and that kind of thing. And when Trump got elected, it was also God at work, perhaps to bring conservative judges and balance out the power in America. It's always God's person that's in there, for whatever reason He has, thus, "those in positions of authority have been placed here by God," writes Paul. He doesn't say why. So I've often argued that sometimes a person gets placed in authority by God for the purpose of teaching people a lesson. There are conservatives who would say Barack Obama was placed there by God, but it was to teach us not to elect any more liberals. And, those opposed to Trump will say, "God put Trump in there to teach us not to go too extreme the other way." And of course, each side will also say (when their guy gets elected), he's placed there by God because God wants him there and He's going to work through him." So you can see how this kind of passage can be used just about any way anybody wants to use it. And maybe that's always the danger. That's why it's always controversial.

Paul goes on and says, *Anyone who rebels against authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and they will be punished.* That sounds like we need to just blindly submit to authorities. If you read it literally and don't have some flexibility in it, then the United States started by violating Scripture, right? They didn't submit to the authorities they had in place. They dumped the tea in the harbor and rebelled against the

king. Yet, they started what has been a pretty successful nation overall in world history.

Fear of authorities (13:3)

For authorities, do not strike fear in people who are doing what's right, but in those who are doing wrong. This may be generally true, but there are people who do what's right, and yet the authorities strike fear in them. You need only to go over to Russia or China to prove that this is not always true. There are people doing what is right, and yet the authorities strike fear into them. I don't think Paul's speaking in absolute terms. It's relativistic, and as a general principle, he may be saying that when people are in authority, even secular people, they're trying to keep the peace. So it is better that they stay in power than to have total chaos. For example, the two men who were crucified alongside Christ were bad guys; they were breaking the laws of that day.

Paul wrote, "Authorities, do not strike fear in people who are doing what's right?" Well, if you're doing what's right and they're good authorities that are trying to make society better, then yes, and you have nothing to fear. For example, generally, if I'm driving down the street, I don't have to be afraid of a police car, but I'm always a little bit uneasy if one gets behind me. I tend to take the next turn just because I don't want them following me, knowing I can mess up anytime. I talked to a police officer once that I knew, and he told me he could follow me around and he could write me a ticket, because I would do something wrong (according to the book) within five minutes. So authorities usually don't strike fear into people who are doing this right, yet they do to some degree. If I'm doing what's right when I drive around, I still don't like that sense of authority on my tail. No one does. It's an uneasy feeling, because they not only strike fear in those who are doing wrong but even in those doing what's right. So, this is a general principle Paul is giving, that mostly applies to people out

there doing what's wrong. They're much more afraid, and rightly so, that they might get caught.

Paul goes on and writes, *Would you like to live without fear of the authorities? Well then, do what is right, and they will honor you.* Again, that is generally true when they are good and honorable authorities. Most of them appreciate good citizens who do not cause them trouble. I know a couple of the police in our town, County Sheriff and Highway Patrol guys, and they're not out to cause people grief. In fact, they don't want trouble; they have enough trouble that comes with their job. I talked to a policeman recently at a local minister's luncheon that was held at the police station, hosted by a chaplain on the force. The lady who came to the locked door to let me in told me that half of the issues they deal with are alcohol and drug-related. Other than that, people go about their business and don't cause trouble. So if you're doing what's right, you probably don't have anything to fear, except occasionally (and you see it on the news), there are a few bad cops out there that do bad things and give everyone else a bad name. But, hey, there are bad lawyers, bad doctors, even bad pastors. There are bad counselors and bad people in every discipline that give all the good ones a bad name. It just kind of goes with the territory. But generally, I'd say there are many good people in law enforcement who want to make society better, safer, and good. "Do what's right," says Paul, "and they'll honor you." They'll appreciate you!

15. Listen to Your Conscience (Romans 13:4-5)

God's servants (13:4)

The authorities are God's servants sent for your good. My guess is that Paul is, again, making a general statement. Paul knows there are some people in authority who are bad. Looking at the Old Testament, you will find good and bad kings. Some of Israel's kings were really corrupt, and others were very good. *But if you're doing wrong, of course, you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong.* Again, this is generally true, perhaps even mostly true. That's what most governing authorities do: they maintain order. They do this mostly out of self-preservation rather than any great benevolence; they want to stay in power. But God knows this and uses this motivation in an overall good way. They round up the bad guys and bring them to justice. Is this always the case? Do bad cops do bad things? Yep, and Paul knew this. But generally, the presence of civil authority is a good thing in most societies.

As I'm sure you are well aware, politics is a strange endeavor. In that arena, good people can be legally pursued, and bad people allowed to get away with crimes, all in the name of "supporting our guy" and "sticking it to the other side." In my long lifetime, I have witnessed an increase in both of these. I grew up in a fairly conservative family, and to see many people give up their highly

held moral values to support someone who violates many of those same values (right in front of their eyes) is a great mystery to me. I have many long-time friends who have chosen to follow politicians who give them what they want (some kind of personal, material benefit and a better chance to defeat the opposition), but at the expense of having their moral compass spin recklessly and inconsistently. It is as if they are under some kind of political spell, or in some kind of mind-numbing cult.

I have also seen many who were once compassionate and genuinely care about those in need move further and further into extremes, seeking solutions that have (historically) proven to be disastrous, apparently just to “stick it to those they oppose.” What happened to civility, rationality, and wisdom? Where did it go? I mention all of this because it illustrates how easily humans (those in authority, or subjects under them) can lose perspective and no longer act in ways that best serve the interests of all people. This kind of real love is always at the heart of who God is. He is the one person in the universe who keeps perfect perspective, never overreacts, and works towards bringing everything to a good and grand conclusion. Fortunately, God never allows our craziness to derail Him in any way. He has a plan, a good one, and will carry it out to full and complete conclusion someday in eternity. This is why Paul, in two of his other letters (to the Ephesians and Colossians), states very clearly that “God will reconcile all things to Himself, everything in heaven and on earth!” That is very complete, absolute, and certain. I am so glad someone in this universe knows what they're doing and has the power and love to make it happen.

If you ever wondered about the importance of governing authorities in our lives, just imagine if there were no police and you were completely on your own in your home, trying to go to work each day, protect your kids, and live your life with purpose and goals. If there were no law enforcement out there to act as a deterrent, life would be a living hell because “might makes right,”

and you'd get robbed, abused, and taken advantage by those stronger than you. You wouldn't have anything. So life without governmental authorities, imperfect as it always is, would be horrific. I think this is probably what Paul is saying. But you can see how people can take a passage like this and falsely conclude, "Wow, I guess we just have to do everything that the authorities say, no matter what."

Keep in mind that back in Paul's days, in their culture, they didn't have a First and Second Amendment as we do. They didn't have a US Constitution. We have all this and more based on "We, the people..." who are, ultimately, the government? That's a pretty cool, unique thing. They didn't have this back then; they only had iron-fisted Rome, controlling them and keeping wrong-doers in line. Of course, people were also heavily taxed, leaving only enough money to get by. There were no trips to Disneyland or the Caribbean. Only survival and a few small pleasures in life. We have it so good, despite our many challenges. This is why I encourage everyone to become a student of history. It is eye-opening and brings badly needed perspective to our modern-day living.

Paul was basically saying to his readers that some kind of governing authority is unavoidable and that they need to submit as needed or life will become miserable. He was giving them practical advice. They were never going to get their *rights* read to them, benefit from habeas corpus, or be granted a speedy trial (all of which we take for granted today). Those ideas and liberties would not come about for another 1500 years! Rome just hauled people in and took care of business in a state-controlled trial (as Jesus received). When I was in China, I noticed that they controlled everything. People were free to go to work and live very basic lives, but there was no freedom of speech or religion. All governing authorities over there are appointed, not elected, just like in ancient Rome.

So a world without any governance or law enforcement would be much worse than a world with them, imperfect as they are. This is, probably, Paul's point when he says, "If you're doing wrong, of course you should be afraid, for they have the power to punish you. They are God's servants sent for the very purpose of punishing those who do what is wrong."

Submit appropriately (13:5)

So you must submit to them not only to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience. There are two parts to what Paul is suggesting to his readers. First, don't go around doing what's wrong. Don't murder or steal. Don't cause governing authorities grief and rebel against them. Even Jesus didn't work against the governing authorities; he opposed the religious authorities of that day. Funny, the secular authorities were *not* trying to represent God in any way, yet they were. The religious authorities, on the other hand, *were* trying to represent God, but they didn't! Pilate, who was the local Roman authority when Jesus was crucified, tried his best to get Jesus released. The Jewish leaders, who were the local religious authorities, did their best to get Jesus crucified and out of their way, but ultimately, they failed when he rose from the dead!

It looks as if Paul is putting everyone under the complete control of the government, but I think Paul would agree with Jesus, who struck a balance to "render unto Caesar (government) what belongs to it, and render unto God what belongs to God?" Caesar and God each represent different realms of life; the spiritual one is far more important than the other. So, Paul's letting his readers know they have a decision to make. He wants them to decide to submit to the government to avoid punishment, but also to keep a clear conscience before God, which is his second suggestion to them. Obviously, keeping a clear conscience is more important than submitting; One is

spiritual and the other practical. Paul is always a fan of both in his letters! I believe that is how we need to conduct ourselves before God: proper submission in each realm. God deals with us *internally*, and the government deals with us *externally*. So, when the time comes, who should we submit to? Well, we submit to Rome (government) if it's a *Rome* issue, but ultimately to God in all things, because he's the only one who has complete control of everything. I think our conscience is what must lead us in both of those realms, whether we're honoring God or a human ruler.

I have a friend who once worked on the police force, and he told me there are too many people out there who do not honor authority. Most people are just trying to stay out of the way so they don't get caught up in any of the turmoil and chaos that's going on. For him, as a believer and a citizen, he believes it must ultimately be a *conscience* thing, after we come to know the Lord, and he gives us the peace to navigate through life peacefully and successfully. However, there is a time to honor God above all others. We need to always follow Jesus and do what we know is right. If someone wants to throw us in jail for it, so be it. But getting thrown in jail for doing something wrong that is not a matter of conscience is just foolish and dishonors God. My friend's grand conclusion is, "When it comes to the spiritual things in life, we submit to our Father in heaven."

I know a couple of people who don't go over the speed limit (at least they say they don't) because if they do, they would be disobeying the governing authorities and therefore disobeying God. Well, if you take what Paul says as infallible requirements from God that must be obeyed, and see the Bible as a big rule book, then by all means you really shouldn't go over the speed limit to prevent you from disobeying God. Your conscience won't be clear if you violate it. (Paul will deal with this more in Romans 14).

But I look at it non-legalistically. If I go over the speed limit, I try to keep it at no more than five mph over. This seems to be

pretty much what everyone else does. I even think the speed limits are set with this in mind, knowing people tend to push the limits. So it is generally tolerated by law enforcement. It's kind of a guideline. But, technically, it's the legal speed limit, and they *can* write you up if they want. If you go over the speed limit by a greater amount, you probably will get a ticket if caught. They have also found another human tendency, that writing tickets slows people down, both the drivers and the observers. So, are you also disobeying God? Well, if you think you are, then don't go over the speed limit! On the other hand, if you think, "Okay, if I get caught, I pay the ticket, and that's my punishment," then take your chances. God's got bigger things to do in life, and may just figure you got what you deserve in order to learn what is needed in that area of life. So you can see where people can take even minor technicalities legalistically. Or, these can be viewed with a degree of liberty in mind and focus on the moral imperatives that God seems to focus on, wanting the best life for us.

God wants us to keep laws (His and the government's) for our benefit because we want to do what's right, and most laws are there to help us live a better life. God's focus is always on the end result of things rather than just the means. However, *how* we do anything matters, not just *what* we do. The highest law is that of love. When we see life through the lens of love, it changes everything, and it's much more effective and successful. People who understand God's grace know this is the only real way to live because if we really love others, even strangers, we're not going to weave in and out of traffic and put their lives at risk. We're also not going to run red lights just because we're in a hurry and think everyone ought to stop for us. We have a society with many selfish people, and so setting order and rules is a good thing. But there are consequences right here on this earth for violating these rules that are not part of the spiritual realm. We all want to avoid pain; it's as simple as that. But to think we're violating God's law

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in every nitpicking rule people come up with is ridiculous and an awful way to live.

16. Love Is God's Requirement (Romans 13:6-10)

Give everyone what you owe them (13:6)

For the same reasons, pay your taxes too. Taxes are not new. This is as old as society itself. There will always be taxes. So Paul tells his readers to pay their taxes for the same reasons of avoiding punishment and keeping a clear conscience. *The government workers need to be paid.* Yep. We never get something for nothing. If you want to get rid of all government, and a few out there do, there will be chaos worse than almost any reasonable governmental authority structure. I tend to lean toward as small a government as possible, simply because of the inevitable inefficiency of such a large institution. I served in the Army as a young man, and I witnessed the waste that occurs when funds are automatically allocated and do not need to be earned (as is the case in the private sector). But we need government for many basic things in life: protecting the country, regulating commerce, breaking up monopolies, providing fire, police, emergency workers, maintaining infrastructure, etc. Otherwise, people will take advantage of everybody else.

They are serving God in what they do. Whether such government workers realize it or not, they're serving God's purpose. They might not be saying, "Oh, what a great privilege to serve God in this way," though some may very well do this. There

might be some people in government who honestly believe they're doing God's work, trying to help society succeed. I know some policemen, etc., who see their job as a high *calling*, difficult and dangerous as it is.

Give to everyone whatever you owe them. I don't think this means just money. We are to give to everyone whatever we owe them, financially, physically, mentally, and even spiritually. In other words, do a good and worthwhile job. Paul taught in his letter to the Colossians, "In whatever you do, do it to the glory of God." I posted that verse on my technician bench when I was a young worker to help me get through the parts of my job I didn't like. There were days when I wanted to toss it in the trash, but it usually helped me stay focused and keep a broader perspective on life.

Pay your taxes and government fees to those who collect them, and give respect and honor to those who are in authority. This is hard to do. Respect and honor them? Can't I just pay them and mumble under my breath about having to do so? Paul wants better for us. What comes out of our mouth, even as a mumble, reflects what is in our heart. An angry heart is also an unhappy and miserable one. Either way, we have to pay taxes to fund all the benefits we gain. It's the old *half-full, half-empty* glass choice. It all depends on how we view life. My solution is to see the glass both empty and full at the same time, rather than choosing to focus on one aspect. For me, this is the only real solution. On one hand, life is a half-empty glass. There is always something important missing. This is realistic. But on the other hand, the glass of life is half full, and being thankful for what we have in life will produce more contentment than all the efforts of trying to fill the other half. However, there is something to be said for going after things in life. I have found that the *journey* is more satisfying than the *destination* (possessing a full glass). But

recognizing that we all live with a glass that is both half-empty and half-full is probably the best way to live life. I see this in all of Paul's writings. In some ways, he is very idealistic and optimistic. Yet, he is also always very *realistic*. Do you see this in him? This has really helped me over my 75 years of living.

At least for the fact that they are in authority, I try to respect and honor whoever the president is. It is not so much the *man* himself (and maybe someday the woman), but the high office they fill. When they are out of office, their limited, temporary power ends, and they become just one of us; someone else then takes their place for a season. I always keep this in mind and do not become overly invested in a person or personality, as if they are almost God-like in fulfilling my needs. They are not and never will be. God, alone, meets my needs, all of them, and is the only one worthy of my trust. I have found there's always a flawed person in any presidency, and I try to give as much respect and honor as possible, within what is appropriate, since I believe in God as the ultimate authority in all matters of life. I try to give everybody the respect owed to them, not just people in authority, but also all the common, average nobodies out there like me!

Owe nothing to anyone (13:8)

Well, Paul continues on with a little different view of the same topic. *Owe nothing to anyone except for your obligation to love one another*. I had a friend contact me a couple of weeks ago who told me he was watching the video series of my commentaries. I really like him; he's a longtime friend, and I thanked him because he's a guy I've known since my 30s, when we used to go around and around discussing doctrine. So I told him, "Hey, you were part of my *show prep* because when we hammered a lot of things out as young guys, I was formulating all that I believed and what I would end up believing in the future, sometimes quite different from our conclusions way back then! I

owed him more than he or I realized back in my younger days, and I love him today for all the time we spent together (and it was a lot), not knowing where I was headed.

That “obligation” to love, which Paul spoke of, resides in the *spirit* of the law rather than the *letter* of the law. Paul addressed this back in Romans Seven (volume 1 of this commentary). He talked about the law being “good and holy and righteous.” But here he is saying, “What really counts is what we do in the *spirit* of the law, in our obligation to love others.” He is not using the word obligation in the usual sense where a person begrudgingly performs some act of loyalty because it is required, either by conscience or by law. Instead, it is an eager-to-serve kind of obligation, rooted in genuine love, realizing how much God loves us, and enjoying such an obligation to the fullest. This has helped me so much because now when I engage with people, whether they go to church and are religious (and these people are sometimes the hardest to deal with), or secular people who have little interest in spiritual things, I always try to relate on a higher plane, to disagree in love, and let that *law of love* reign supreme over all else. This works very well and makes for great relationships (with those who will receive it) and yields a much more peaceful and fulfilling life of joy.

But sometimes people can be so rigid. I think most of them genuinely believe this is what God wants them to do, or that this is the habit they have formed over their lifetime. But when I deal with them, I seek to let my love reign over theology, doctrine, creeds, and other kinds of rigid fundamentalism that are so prevalent in religion today. I know all about this; I lived it for 60 years, but I will never go back to it, having experienced the love and grace of God as fully as I have. What a contrast, and there is no greater teacher. Let the love of Christ rule in your heart and let it govern your relationships with people. Beyond that, sure, we can talk about what we believe and where we disagree, but the

love that we see as our good and enjoyable *obligation* is the greatest thing we can experience. Try it sometime!

If you get this reversed, where your doctrinal statements, creeds, and personal dogmas reign supreme (as I once did) it can be so divisive that you can fall into the trap of thinking this is how God operates and therefore is right for you, too. What also happens is that love takes a back seat. Oh, sure, it is there and acknowledged, but it is never the driving force. Standing up for what is right, never backing down, and making sure everyone sees how loyal you are to someone else's dogmatic claims all become your reason for living. None of these things, in and of themselves, is bad, but when they dominate over genuine love (which is stronger by far than all creeds combined), you end up weaker than you need to be, always chasing the goal of being the one who is right. It's a vain chase! You will find yourself thinking, or even telling people, "You better do and believe this, or you're a heretic and a false teacher." I used to think and say this until it all came back on me from others who held the same low-love disposition. At some point, when I honestly crossed a line that they did not approve of, I got an angry earful. Wow, did that cure me of legalism, or what? Nothing like getting a taste of your own flawed medicine. I wrote a novel, many years ago, a fictitious story about a young couple who experienced this kind of thing, but also how it totally changed their lives (individually and together). Check it out. It is titled, *Streams of Terrible Beauty*, and I like to describe it as a "philosophical, spiritual, romantic adventure."

Love your neighbor (13:8b)

If you love your neighbor, you will fulfill the requirements of God's law. Want to "keep the law," folks, especially those of you who are more law-oriented, then just love your neighbor. Remember, love is not just having an affectionate *feeling* for them; love is *acting* in the best interest of others at your

own expense and loss. Additionally, according to Jesus, your “neighbor” can be a complete stranger who is despised by society, and someone risky to rescue. (See the *Good Samaritan* parable by Jesus.)

This is what God did for us. He effectively said, through Jesus, “I’m going to love the world, at my own expense and the expense of my Son giving up his rightful position in that other realm, coming down and joining the human race and dying to save all humanity.” Before Jesus rose from the dead victoriously, he had to anguish in the Gethsemane Garden and cry out, “Oh Father, if this cup of suffering I’m about to experience can pass from me, that is what I desire, yet I desire more that Your will be done no matter what that is.” It costs God something to come down and love us. He gave up a lot for our benefit. Now, it is true that God also gains something wonderful and beautiful as a result (intimate and pure fellowship with his creation), but still, acts of love always have a price.

So we fulfill the *true* requirements of God's law by loving other people; really loving them genuinely, the way love works best, not just talking about it or having affectionate feelings. Love is action. Real love acts, one way or another. Sometimes it's appropriate *inaction*, where we can love somebody by just being there and supporting them. We don't have to fix all their problems. We wish we could, but love is willing to “bear all things with them,” as Paul once wrote in his chapter defining love. Love doesn't necessarily hand out money, right and left, to everyone who needs it. That might not be loving them as they need to be loved. We can actually hurt people by solving the surface problem too soon and too easily. They may need to learn to be responsible, just as so many of us have learned (and maybe still need to learn more about). So even if you have a lot of money and you want to go help people, you might not help them by just giving them money and enabling them to continue their lack of discipline.

So love takes action, or sometimes doesn't take action, but it is always there for people, ready to act. It says, "I'm here with you. Let's talk. How can I be your friend? How can we solve your problem in the right way?"

For the commandments say, "You must not commit adultery. You must not murder. You must not steal. You must not covet." Yep, they sure do. It is interesting that Paul is quoting from the Ten Commandments. Most of them are negative, telling us what *not* to do. This is kind of like the US Constitution. It mostly states what the government *can't* do, leaving all else (what is unsaid) to be our God-given liberties. It assumes that we have rights, and then lays out what the government can't do; where it is limited. The government can't establish an official religion. This leaves us to be religious or to be free from it. I like freedom *from* religion, except for the kind of religion defined by James in his letter: taking care of those in need and focusing on our own spiritual issues rather than those of others.

Our Constitution assumes that we are free. The Ten Commandments, on the other hand, assume we are sinning. But it contains only a small number of prohibitions, all of which are very key in a functioning society (don't steal, murder, or lie). Other than that, we're pretty darn free to be human beings, enjoy life, and go after important and trivial pursuits as we desire. God's goal is to keep us out of trouble and experience freedom fully and purely! But I prefer the New Testament approach much better. It is low on mere legalism and offers a better solution than just keeping a bunch of laws. It invites us to enter into a wonderful relationship with our Creator, who wants to free us from our sin that so hinders and destroys us.

Here is Paul's bottom line about laws, good as they generally are. *These and other such commandments are summed up in*

this one commandment: Love your neighbor as yourself. Okay, so all the Ten Commandments and all the moral laws from the Law of Moses can be summed up in one important, all-encompassing idea: love others! If you really, truly, genuinely love others and always act in their best interest, you will be keeping all the laws ever given because you won't be violating any of the commands that the law spells out in detail. You won't need to list all the things you should not do (as the Old Testament does). You only need one grand, guiding principle: genuinely love others. Perhaps God took the time (a long time) to establish the law in all its detail and complexity to demonstrate, once and for all, that law is not needed when true love prevails. *Love does no wrong to others, so love fulfills the requirements of God's law.* And this is so much simpler and more inclusive than any long, detailed list of dos and don'ts ever could be. Just know what love is, go do it, and you'll never go wrong!

17. Time Is Running Out (Romans 13:11-14)

Live decent lives (13:11)

This is going to get interesting. It is urgent for you to know how late it is. What kind of *late* is Paul talking about? Not late at night, but late in world events. Time is running out, says Paul. Wake up because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed. The night is almost gone. The day of salvation will soon be here. Paul, Peter, John, and the other New Testament writers anticipated the Second Coming of Jesus (salvation) to be right around the corner in their lifetimes. Even Jesus said, "This generation will not pass away before *all* these things come to pass," as recorded in Matthew's Gospel account. Jesus described his Second Coming as "lightning flashing from east to west," indicating that it will be an event no one can miss. He told his followers, "You won't need to go ask somebody if this is it," because everyone will know it. It's going to be obvious. It would be a big deal, and all these things will happen within this generation. But they didn't!

On another occasion, Jesus told his followers that some of them would still be alive when he returned with his angels in glory. There is no doubt that he had his grand Second Coming in mind. But it never happened in that timeframe! Were Jesus, Paul, John, and all others mistaken? This is probably the biggest problem facing the credibility of Christianity. However, most Christians ignore it, even though it is clearly stated repeatedly in

the New Testament. The book of Revelation is probably the most adamant about God's judgment on Rome ("the city on seven hills") taking place soon, in that immediate timeframe, saying things like, "even those who crucified Jesus will see him coming on the clouds when he returns."

And so, because salvation is right around the corner, he adds this: *Remove your dark deeds that are like dirty clothes and put on the shining armor of right living.* This is the same kind of comparison that Paul often makes in his letters, and has done so several times here in his letter to the Romans. Here it is, *dirty clothes vs shining armor.* Elsewhere, he compares the flesh and the spirit, old and new self, law and grace, and Adam vs Christ. These all represent the same thing: who we are in our humanity compared to who we are in God. But in this passage, Paul is warning that time is running out on moving from sin to success. The new person we are in Christ can't sin and is perfect because God made us perfect, doing away with the old person we were, unable to become perfect. Yet, we somehow still struggle with sin and the old nature in this life; it is just a matter of degree. By faith, walking with God daily, living in the Spirit, we taste of the wonderful, complete freedom from sin that we will someday experience in eternity. But for now, it's a struggle, one we can mostly win, experientially. This is why Paul always encourages people to turn to God, follow Jesus, and seek the Spirit, because he knows we will grow in our knowledge of God and improve our daily lives. "Remove your dark deeds like dirty clothes and put on the shining armor of right living," he tells them. They can choose to live this way at least some of the time and in some situations, though not fully and completely. He is encouraging this, but also warning that time is running out.

Paul continues to explain: *we belong to the day, so we must live decent lives for all to see.* He's making a contrast between light and darkness, good and evil, right and wrong living. If we belong to the day, it should result in living a decent life that other people will see. The idea is that people will learn what right and wrong are by seeing our good behavior, which will have a good influence on them. *Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy.* Notice Paul puts quarreling and jealousy right up there with wild parties. Churches, for example, don't tend to have wild parties, and rightly take great pride in that. That's good. But what about quarreling and jealousy? Well, that gets around plenty in every church or group of gathered people. It is common to all human beings in differing degrees. Churches are not exempt from quarreling or jealousy. These are hard to keep under control because often they are just slips of the tongue. So easy to do. But it is also harder for churches to call these things out, as Paul does here. Quarreling and jealousy can be more widely destructive than wild parties!

Clothe yourselves with Jesus (13:14)

Instead, clothe yourselves with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is putting on the new person we already are in Jesus. But we must mentally decide to put on this newness that we already have from God. As Paul exhorted at the beginning of Romans Twelve, the problem is that our minds need to change. God has already taken care of our ultimate reality by placing us in Christ as new creations. But we do not always see this, or we do not fully realize what we know. So, our minds and perspectives need to change and be renewed.

The new and old natures are both there, experientially for us, even though God sees us as perfect in Christ. But we *can* put on

this new mind and this desire to do what's right, at least occasionally, for a while, until we slip back into our old thinking and need to be awakened by God through His Spirit that dwells in us. It tends to be an endless cycle in life, but one that gradually spirals upward, growing closer to God each day. In this way, we are all successful, and it gives us a reason to never give up. God sure won't!

Remember what Paul said at the end of Romans Seven? “I do what I don't want to do, and I don't do what I do want. Who will free me from this body of death?” Just as he did in Romans Eight, Paul here gives the solution: “But clothe yourselves with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Then he adds this: *And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge in your evil desires.* Everybody has those evil desires, even if they are less evil than those of some other people. It doesn't have to always be about sexual misbehavior. It can be jealousy, selfishness, or gossiping. Sometimes gossiping destroys more lives than sexual indiscretion, yet it is tolerated and engaged in more frequently. Evil can come in the form of anger. This can be anger toward someone because they don't believe what you do, don't behave the way you want, or just happen to be in the wrong political party. Are we genuinely concerned about the person we are angry with, or is it more of a self-serving anger? There seems to be no end to evil and wrong desires. Remember Paul's list of sins in Romans One?

So Paul reminds people not to even *think* about ways to indulge in evil desires. Thinking is always where sin starts. When I was a young man, a mentor told me, “Carl, you can't help thinking, but you can help what you think.” This is what Paul was getting at near the end of his letter to the Philippians, when he said, “Dwell on good things of high moral excellence, and the peace of God will be with you.” Why would this help? Because what we think about is what we eventually become. (See my commentary on Paul's Philippian letter titled, *The Peace of God from*

the God of Peace for details.) But why do people do evil of any kind? Who wants to jump into evil desires and have to deal with all the guilt, shame, and consequences that come with it? Well, unfortunately, we're all so weak and twisted that we all have this tendency; some have it more than others. If we're mad at somebody, reacting in our sinful nature, we want to wallow in our anger because, in a strange way, it makes us feel better even though we're miserable. This is hard to explain, but I think everyone can relate to it. It's one of the most amazing things about human beings.

I talk to people all the time who are living miserably, but they won't give up their resentment. I have a friend I talked to recently, who dwells on the problems he's had with others in the past and some in the present, and he won't let go of it. He just focuses on it over and over. Why? Habit? Feels good in some strange sense of *good*? I encouraged him to go do what he can to love those other people. "Just love them," I told him. "Love them and shut up. Don't try to even the score or get back at them. It will never work, and you will end up more miserable. Talk less and love more by helping them in some way. Start building a better friendship (if they will let you) by bringing goodwill into situations." It's not that complicated; it's just hard to do. We love to wallow in our hurt, don't we? "They hurt me so bad," is our excuse. "They need to know how this feels." Leave that up to God. Has God ever shown you how you have wronged someone without them ever needing to tell you? Let God do this for others in His time.

Loving misery

We complain and say we're miserable, and yet we stay there in it. I think we stay there because it's easy. It takes courage and effort to get out! But God is always there to help, and He will never give up helping you since He wants the best for you and is

determined to eventually achieve it! Sometimes people are comfortable with their misery, digging into the past and dwelling on it because that's what's on their mind. It's familiar. Do they stay there because they love it, or do they stay there because they've been there so long and it's become a lifestyle? It's like a favorite childhood blanket. It's a habit. They actually feel funny coming out of that place of *comfortable misery*. Even if they venture out, at first they think, "Oh, good. I'm free from this!" but then they miss that feeling they've had forever. It feels funny not to feel the resentment that they were clinging to. It's like a security blanket. Crazy, aren't we?

Some people are so used to drama in their life that if it becomes too peaceful, or too calm, they become a little bit bored and miss all the commotion they have acquired a taste for. So, they go back into it or seek some new situation to be miserable in. They gotta have some drama in their life! I think this is what's happened with the mainstream Christian Church down through the ages. They wanted *drama* and *trauma* from *momma* (the Roman Catholic mother church), which brought drama and trauma into the people's lives, and we've inherited all of that today. For some people, it's not really "church" if they don't have some big dramatic thing going on, where God's going to send people to hell if they don't believe. Therefore, they conclude that they've got to go warn people of the pending doom by a God who acts in pure retaliation, eventually abandoning all corrective purposes whatsoever. Now that's drama and trauma from *momma*! Some religious people do this instead of just enjoying life and living it, with all its problems, learning each day from God, who designed it this way. For them, that's just not dramatic enough. Many religious people see life *as* a problem, rather than something that *has* problems.

This is all just part of our sinful nature. Look at the stuff we watch on TV and movies. We are addicted to drama, trauma, and violence. It's always gotta be dramatic, and over the top. I think

we're just funny creatures, and God knows it. We make Him chuckle a lot, not laughing at us in some mean-spirited way, but laughing the way we did with our kids when they were small, misunderstood things, failed while trying to walk, and got themselves into tangled messes. We disciplined them (as God disciplines us) when their messes harmed them, only wanting them to learn and grow. So it is with God concerning us. Fortunately, God knows how it all will end. He knows, eventually, He's going to corral it all and bring everything into reconciliation with Himself. How could He ever settle for anything less, any more than we could with our children? The only difference is that we do not have the power to make this happen, whereas God does!

God knows where it's all headed, and so He can afford to be patient in how He's working in our lives; He's working in everyone's life. According to Paul, He will eventually "fill all in all." In other words, He's going to completely fill every creature in eternity. Remember this was how Paul ended Romans Eleven, before he launched into this final, practical part of his letter? God will be that pervasive. He will be such a part of all His creation that there will be complete harmony and full reconciliation of all people and things. This is headed somewhere good, but right now, for us, it's about how hard it is to deal with evil. We see this going on daily, and we can't help but ask, "What the heck is going on?" Everybody has asked this question since the beginning of time, but it is new to each generation and is a great mystery. However, in Jesus, the mystery is revealed along with who God is and what He wants. This is what Jesus brought. (See my commentary on Paul's letter to the Ephesians titled, *The Mysterious Plan Revealed* for details.)

18. Honor the values of Others (Romans 14:1-13)

Who are you to condemn others? (14:1)

Accept other believers who are weak in the faith; don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. Wow, that says a lot. That probably sums up Romans Fourteen before we even dive into it. This is all about how to rightly deal with others who are weak in the faith, have a different set of values, or believe something different than you. There is no need to argue with them about what's right and wrong, although it is always tempting to do so, wanting to straighten them out. Just love them; that's all you need to do.

Paul knew what was going on in life between people. We see this today in abundance. We see it not just in religious realms, but in politics, relationships, and everywhere else: at work, home, and in coffee shops. People are always sure the other person's gotta be wrong, that they're right, and they need to let them know about it, maybe even correcting them in some way. Well, that's one way to communicate, and many people traffic in it daily. How about you?

Paul has a better way, and he presents it by giving some examples. *For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything, and another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables.* Some people, the way they've been

taught or raised, object to certain foods and choose to be vegetarian. Nothing wrong with that. Daniel and his friends in the Old Testament were vegetarians and proved themselves to be as strong and healthy as anyone who eats meat. Most people are not vegetarians, and that is okay, too, as Paul will indicate.

What Paul's really referring to here is the meat that was offered to idols and then sold for consumption. They get double value out of it. So some people would just eat vegetables to make sure they weren't ever eating meat offered to idols. That too is okay; it's playing it safe. But Paul warns his readers: *Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't.* In other words, don't condescend to people who do not have the freedom to eat anything. *And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do. For God has accepted them.* So if you're on the other end of it and you can't eat anything, you need not condemn others who feel free in what they eat.

Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall, and with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval. I think he's not talking about earthly masters and servants as much as servants and masters in the spiritual realm, where people make decisions that are highly personal. Who are we to judge how others choose to live, habits they keep, or how they serve their master, especially when it is God? He alone will judge whether they stand or fall. It's none of our business. We don't need to go there in our accusations or actions.

And it's not just about eating food. This principle applies to all areas of life. Riding motorcycles, going to bars, doing Bible studies, what church or political party? This goes far beyond eating meat or not. If you think something is not the right thing for you to do, then don't do it. You don't have to condemn people

who do and tell them they're wrong. Just don't do it. Taking this disposition will solve a lot of problems in life. A lot of political problems exist because someone wants to reach over and impose their values on others. Some will go so far as to make a law out of it. But really, all you have to do is say, "I don't do that kind of thing; that's not what I believe." You have taken your stand. Good for you. Now, leave people alone, unless they are being harmed against their will. If it is a matter of differing opinions in the arena of ideas, hold yours dearly and let others hold theirs and make their own choices. It's not all that complicated.

Whatever the hot-button issue is for this year, just let people do it. If they are wrong and hurting themselves, they will learn. God is working more in their lives than any of us ever could. However, there is a time to go to a friend and ask them if what they are doing is wise. But this only works when you are a trusted friend, have their ear in a good way, and maybe have agreed ahead of time to keep each other accountable. I have friends like this, and they are more valuable than being under some kind of general spiritual authority, like a local church. But even this kind of accountability is okay if you desire it. However, there is nothing better and safer than *mutual accountability* between trusted friends. Establish this if you do not already have it in place. I have known pastors who did not have this, or skirted around it, and got themselves into big trouble!

I tend to tell people that I respect their personal decisions, whatever the reasons, but that I don't want to join them. This goes a long way to keeping friendships: mutual respect, even in areas of disagreement. It works because you are not *doing* what's wrong, but you're also not going around judging other people, which we are told, repeatedly in the New Testament, not to involve ourselves in. This is great advice from Paul and is quite a balanced approach to maintaining relationships. It will keep you out of a lot of trouble and remove a lot of stress. It will also improve your relationships with others.

We're sometimes taught at church that if we don't come down on people, correct them, and make sure they know they're doing what's wrong, we're not being good Christians and not doing our job. But all this does is chase people away, leaving us unable to truly help them. I have a friend who goes into bars where motorcycle gangs hang out and starts a Bible study with anyone who will join in. He doesn't impose anything on them or threaten them with hell and damnation. He just tells them that God loves them the way they are, and that He'll never forsake them in any way. Who's gonna punch him out for saying that? They might not believe him, but some end up in tears over time because beneath the surface is a person who desperately needs to be genuinely loved.

Live and die to honor God (14:5)

Paul now applies his principle to another area of life. *In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike.* Paul now switches from eating habits to ritualistic issues, about celebrating certain days, feasts, and festivals. These are all things still lingering from Old Testament laws. *You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable.* When to have a festival, go to church, or even to celebrate the resurrection, all require a day to be chosen. Do you want to worship on the Sabbath? I have friends who are 7th-day Adventists, and they attend church on Saturdays. That's okay, according to Paul. They believe the 4th Commandment applies to them today, even though they are under a *new* covenant. They even get an added benefit because they can rent their church building out to Sunday-goers.

Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor Him. Any day you want to make special is honoring to God, even Wednesday nights, which was something we did as kids in our upbringing. Seemed normal to me at the time. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord since they give thanks to God before eating. Some people in Paul's day stayed away from certain foods. They were doing it because they were obeying their conscience and doing what they believed was right. A person who worships on a certain day or eats certain foods, even if not required, doesn't matter. That's what they honestly think is right. So they're doing what's right in their own mind and heart. They have a clear conscience. However, if they turn around and tell you that you must do this, too, they have crossed a line. They are now judging you. You can judge them back, or you can say, "Well, I'm not going to judge you for judging me. You go ahead and do it, and I'll just love you in return." That's hard to do, but once you do it, it's really good. However, trust me, they won't like it. You have taken the higher road of love, and they instinctively know it. It threatens the judgmental lifestyle that they have learned and become accustomed to. They're going to be mad at you because you're not coming back and judging them in return. This makes things uncomfortably unequal. Actually, you're *out-loving* them. You really are. This is nothing to be proud about; just be thankful to God for granting you such freedom. Over time, if you keep loving people and don't judge them, they'll find something attractive in it. However, they will usually never tell you. It's too embarrassing once they see it. But secretly, in their heart, they get it.

Those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God. How about that? You can have two people doing the opposite things, and they can both be right because they're doing what they believe is right before God!

Get this figured out, and your relationships with people will greatly improve. However, this is not true of everything. You can't have one person committing adultery and the other being faithful to his wife. They are not both doing what is right in different ways. Letting people be right in doing what they prefer doesn't work on everything, but it does work on things that are not *moral absolutes*. There are a lot of these in life. There are so many little nitpicking things, it's amazing. We make big deals out of too many of them. We use it to separate ourselves from others. It's just not necessary, and it doesn't make for good relationships.

We don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honor the Lord, and if we die, that too is to honor the Lord. Okay, I like that. If you're going to live to honor God, whether you eat something or don't eat something, worship on one day or another day, it doesn't matter. It is *why* you're doing it that counts. So whether we live or die, it's about honoring God. And why? Because He somehow needs us to honor Him? Not a chance. He is totally satisfied, self-sufficient, and content. The only thing He wants is for us to do well in life, get to know Him, and then live with Him forever. Our act of honoring God is for *our* benefit. We gain the most from it by focusing on the solution in life (God Himself) rather than worthless things that can destroy us. *So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose: To be Lord of both the living and the dead.* Wow, Jesus is lord of the dead! This means He will never give up on anyone.

Judging others (14:10)

So why do you condemn another believer? Remember, we will all stand before the judgment seat of God. This idea of all humanity someday being judged is repeated about seven times in

the New Testament. Along with it, it usually says that “God does not show favoritism and He will render to every person according to what they've done in this life, whether good or bad.” Notice that nothing is said about believing, going to church, or performing rituals as some kind of qualifier. According to Paul, someday everyone will be judged for their actions. Sounds like some kind of *salvation by works* program. Many religious people visualize God like a judge in a black robe, seated behind a big bench with a gavel in His hand, about to pronounce judgment on sinners. Well, for sure, God's gonna bring judgment on everyone's actions in this life. But it's not a mean-spirited judgment, one that executes punishment in pure retaliation with no corrective purpose. The word *judgment* in Greek means “to make an accurate assessment.” All of us do this every day concerning a variety of things in life.

When life is over, all of us will need to be *accurately assessed* (judged) so we can understand what happened, why, and appreciate God's saving grace. It is a good thing, just like everything God does. There is always an ultimately good purpose. This judgement (accurate assessment) will allow us to bring some closure so we can reconcile with other people based on what really happened in life and why. Many will be thinking, “Wow, at the time I really thought I was right, regarding disconnected friends, loved ones, and family members. Please forgive me!” And they will forgive because they, too, will have gained an accurate assessment about themselves. This will all be part of what Paul wrote in his letters to both the Ephesians and Colossians: “God will reconcile all things to Himself, everything in heaven and on earth.” If we all become reconciled to God, then we will all become reconciled with each other, no matter what awful things happened in life!

And so on judgment day, part of that judgment will include, “Hey, let's call a spade a spade and admit what happened in all

the things we did, good and bad. We can now clear the air, clean the slate, love and accept each other, which was what we tried to do on earth, but couldn't." God's going to bring this all about. His judgments may even be severe, but they will be severe in a good way. Do you remember what Paul wrote at the end of Romans Eleven? "Behold the goodness and severity of God." He is always severe in his goodness, but also always good in His severity!

For the Scriptures say, "As surely as I live, says the Lord. Every knee will bend to me, and every tongue will confess and give praise to God." Paul says this also in his letter to the Philippians, except he uses the words *should confess* instead of *will confess*. Both are true, but in this passage, he is reassuring us that someday all people will be on the same page before God. This verse can be (and often is) taken in two different ways. It can be seen as a mean God, who's got his foot on their throat, forcing them to confess that He is Lord. But what good is that? What kind of God is so puny that He must resort to forcing allegiance, and still not getting it in any genuine way? What kind of enjoyment, success, or purpose is there in doing this? Then there is the view of God where people in eternity are so thankful for their salvation, knowing they did not earn it in any way, many of them having fought God all the way in life, that they can't help but fall on their knees and confess how wonderful Jesus is as their savior.

Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God, so let's stop condemning each other. We can quit condemning each other now. There will be an accounting someday that will deal with all our grievances. There will be an attitude of, "Hey, I was wrong. I messed up. What was I thinking? Thank you, God, for bringing about this judgment of accurate assessment." Notice

that it's a *personal* accounting to God. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall. Paul ties this in with the first part of Romans Fourteen, where he discusses preferred foods and days, and how we need not condemn each other over such differences.

19. Follow Your Convictions (Romans 14:14-23)

Ruining others (14:14)

I know, and I am convinced on the authority of the Lord Jesus, that no food in and of itself is wrong to eat. We are free to eat anything. This is no big deal for us today because we don't have all the dietary laws that the Jews lived under. Paul has already stated that there are some people who, if they eat certain foods, feel guilty. That's not a healthy way to live. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. Paul is presenting a kind of relativistic morality. However, if someone violates their conscience, even if it is unwarranted, the resulting guilt (false as it may be) remains the same. So to some degree, our morals depend on our walk with God and what we believe. If another believer is distressed by what you eat, you're not acting in love if you eat it. So this means if I go to a bar to listen to some music or even have a bible study as my friend does sometimes, and while there I also have a beer or some wine, that's okay unless there's someone there trying to quit drinking and my actions discourage him. Well, first, this is not a good place to hang out if you're trying to quit drinking! Am I willing to forgo anything to act in the best interest of my friend? This is what love is all

about: acting in the best interests of others at our own expense or inconvenience. This happened to me once at a bar, with a friend who was trying not to drink. I told him, "No one should try *not* to drink alone!" So, I joined him and didn't drink all that evening. He was encouraged.

But there's another side to this coin. It's called "Christian liberty." We need not always avoid something just because somebody thinks it's wrong. If you do this, your life will be chased around by everybody's whim. Right? So sometimes you need to decide what kind of situation you are in and, therefore, what to tell people. Sometimes it is a great opportunity to teach legalistic Christians what liberty they have in Christ that they are not aware of. I just tell them, "I can do this. I can eat this stuff, I can drink this stuff, but I don't get drunk. If you can't, then don't. But I want you to know that I believe I have a freedom in Christ that includes everything that is not clearly morally wrong." It can be a teaching moment. But there might be another case where the person is so struggling they're not going to learn the lesson of Christian liberty. They are not ready to learn that right now. They may just need a strong brother or sister in Jesus who says, "You know what, I'll choose not to drink right along with you tonight. Let's *not* drink together! So it depends on the situation; you have to decide what's the right thing to do in different situations at the time.

Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died.

Paul is back on to eating meat offered to idols. That was a big deal back then. If somebody saw you eating meat offered to idols, and they were taught that this was wrong (forbidden by religious law), it could really hurt their relationship with God if they're a new believer. On the other hand, in some situations where a person is going around living legalistically, and he wants to impose it on everyone, it might be time to stand up and say, "You know what, bro? I can drink this stuff, and I can eat this meat

offered to idols because it doesn't really mean anything.” So again, it depends on the situation. The key is if a person is “distressed” by something you do, you're not acting in love if you do it. But if they are a legalistic bully who wants to impose their legalism on everyone else, it is okay to oppose them and hopefully teach them something about Christian liberty. Paul ends it with this: *Then you will not be criticized for doing something you believe is good.*

The kingdom of God (14:17)

The Kingdom of God is not a matter of what we eat or drink, but living a life of goodness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Yep. It's about our walk with God, engaging with Him daily, and having a life that manifests this to people around us. That's what they need to see, and that's what we need to see in others, not some cold, sterile law to be kept. Whether you're drinking a beer or not drinking one, a vegetarian or a meat-eater, they need to see goodness along with the peace and joy that we have in God. That's the goal. *If you serve Christ with this attitude, you will please God, and others will approve of you too.* Those guys in the bar, the bikers that my friend reaches out to, it's amazing how they respond to love and a non-condemning spirit, because a lot of them have some kind of *religious* background. A lot of tough guys are really puppy dogs inside. They've just developed a rough exterior, but when somebody comes along and loves them – really loves them and shows it – it can break down the barriers, and they're often in tears. We all tend to get some kind of *tough-guy* (or gal) exterior as protection. Some of these hardened individuals experience true love for the first time in a long time, or ever at all. What they get from most religious people is condemnation, which hardens them even

more. So then, let us aim for harmony in the church (and in the bar), and try to build each other up. Good idea, huh?

Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble. This is Paul's final conclusion on the subject of people living with each other's differences of opinions, perspectives, and values. It's better not to eat meat (or drink wine, or do anything else) if it might cause another believer to stumble. I'd say that's a good general rule, but not exclusively true. If you're not sure, don't do it. Don't assume that everyone you meet needs to learn Christian liberty, pushing it all the time. It is wise to realize, "I really could hurt this other person if I am not lovingly careful in what I tell them." In some situations, it is obvious that this is one of those legalistic, arrogant, aggressive persons who are like a bull in a China shop, needing to be confronted with the wonderful reality of Christian liberty, and how it can free them from their religious bondage, they are so caught up in. Considering how long some of them have been believers in Jesus, they should have learned liberty in Christ by now. But it is so hard for many people to see it, having been so deeply indoctrinated into trying to earn something with God and missing the message of grace almost completely. So I always keep this in mind and try to gently, carefully, lovingly share the message of God's matchless grace with them so they, too, can experience true freedom and peace.

You may believe there's nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. This is a good caution. Don't go out there flaunting your freedom in Christ, trying to teach everyone Christian liberty before they are ready for it. God has His timing in everyone's life. Wait on God; it can't be hurried. Blessed are those who don't feel guilty for doing

something they've decided is right before God. This is what grace is all about. We all experience legitimate guilt simply because we are guilty of some kind of sin or shortcoming. Guilt, like fear and pain, is something God has built into life as a warning system that something is wrong. Some people ignore these warnings, but others create *false* guilt, fear, and shame as a result of their own self-condemnation. They are often taught to associate all of this with God, who they see as a vindictive, retaliating Creator who will someday abandon all corrective purpose. Grace, in comparison to unwarranted guilt, fear, and shame, says, "I love you and have already taken care of your sin problem. Accept my saving working your life, and come to me for comfort and security, and there you will find rest!"

If you have doubts about whether or not you should eat something, you are sinning if you go ahead and do it. If you think something is sin, then it is sin for you because you're violating your own conscience, even if it is not actually sin. If you mistakenly think it is, and you go ahead and do it, basically, you are sinning in your heart. What is the remedy for this? Get an accurate understanding of yourself and God! Yes, we are all sinners (as Paul stated way back in Romans Three). John, in his first letter, told his readers that if they said they were without sin, they were fooling themselves. But when we understand we are sinners who have been forgiven fully by God who so loves us, the guilt, fear, and shame all go away. This is how powerful salvation by grace is! The problem is in our minds and hearts. Remember how Paul started out Romans Twelve, saying that it is our minds (thinking) that need to be renewed? The problem is not with God, but with us. He is working to solve it, not make things worse, and He will not fail.

You are not following your convictions if you do anything you believe is not right. Instead, you are sinning. Well, what Paul probably means is that we are *effectively* sinning due to our misguided sense of guilt. We aren't actually sinning in this case. We already have enough real sin to deal with. But we believe we are, and that is a violation of our conscience we have brought upon ourselves. We're sinning only because we honestly believe (mistakenly) that what we are doing is wrong. We're going against our own value system, even if it's incorrect. Do you see the difference?

I've always thought it interesting that *sin* isn't just the things we do wrong; it includes the attitudes of the mind and the intentions of the heart. And so, if you don't do something that you think is sin, and someday down the road you realize, "Oh, that wasn't wrong; it was okay to do. What was I thinking?" That's good! You have embraced grace and are free from that kind of sin (missing the mark in life) that is based on misconceptions about God and illusions about yourself. A lot of people, when they first come to Christ, naturally fall into a very legalistic, overly careful lifestyle, trying to make up for all their past sins. But this is all part of the growth process, and how we slowly become more like God and learn what true freedom really is. And so don't try to teach people too much, too soon. They will learn what is needed soon enough, in God's good timing. It takes time for everyone to learn; it's what life is all about. Just come alongside and say, "Hey, my friend, how can I be of some encouragement to you, no matter where you are in life at this point in time?" I just want people to experience the wonderful freedom and peace I have in knowing God, in knowing how much He loves me, and that He will never forsake me. I want to help them become free from the bondage of a legalistic mindset.

No matter what chapter we read in Romans, or any other book of the New Testament, I think what Paul wrote at the beginning of Romans Eight pretty much says it all: "There is no

condemnation in Christ.” We're all in Christ, so there is no reason to even think about condemnation, for ourselves or others. The only condemnation God does is the good kind: He condemns sin in the flesh (see the middle of Romans Eight) and wants it completely out of our lives, no longer to cause us problems and grief. And this He will do, someday, completely.

20. Live in Complete Harmony (Romans 15:1-13)

Build each other up (15:1)

Paul will now transition into a new topic by linking it to Romans Fourteen. *We who are strong must be considerate of those who are sensitive about things like this.* I think he means strong in maturity and spirituality, not physically. If we are people who have our act together, at least reasonably so, have learned the hard way in life, and now walk with God daily, we can easily afford to be considerate of others who are still getting there. Hey, we, too, still have a long way to go, ultimately. Everyone is on a journey with God through life, and none of us is done. A lot of us, when we first come to know God, overreact to our past sinful life and are zealous to live for God and show Him how sincere we are. I went through this as a new Christian. I think it is normal. We think, "I'm gonna really live for God. I'm gonna get rid of all my secular music, never gonna drink again, and just hang around fellow believers." It's probably going a little too far, but eventually we grow in God's grace, figure a lot of things out, and are much better off for it. There really is no shortcut, and God knows this. He just works with us, patiently, taking one day at a time, never in a hurry to get things right in our lives. Once we become strong enough in the Lord, we handle life better and can be mindful of those who are new at it.

For example, Paul wrote in his letter to the Ephesians, “Don't be drunk with wine, but be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Notice Paul is saying *don't get drunk*, not *don't drink*. In his letter to Timothy, he tells him to “drink some wine for his stomach's sake.” So it's not an absolute legalistic thing; it just depends on why a person is drinking and how much. I have known Christians who believe any kind of alcohol consumption is wrong. One person was sure that when Jesus turned the water into wine, it was new wine, pre-fermented wine. In other words, grape juice. It's okay for them to place such a restriction on themselves. Perhaps it is in order because alcohol is a problem for them or a loved one. We are wise to be *considerate* of their personal convictions, as Paul exhorts above. But for them to cross a line and judge others who live in the New Testament balance between drinking and getting drunk is *inconsiderate* of them toward others.

So we must not just please ourselves. It's okay to please yourself and live a life that's enjoyable, peaceful, and satisfying. Go have a drink, eat what you want, and engage in social activities that do not violate your conscience and values. God clearly permits this, and He allows a variety of approaches to life according to the diversity in which He has created humanity. However, pleasing yourself should not be your *only* pursuit in life. *But we should help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord.* That's the bottom line for Paul. It is not just about pleasing ourselves. Ultimately, our goal should be to help others do what is right, even at the expense of our own pleasures and enjoyment. This is how real, self-sacrificing love operates. This is how God operates! Don't just live for yourself. Think about how you can build up other people in Christ. As I said previously, there are times when you encounter a person who's legalistic. He's known the Lord for a long time. He should know better, yet he doesn't. It's time to tell him about Christian liberty. It will serve him well, and those around him, if he ever embraces it. God wants

us to be free, but to be free in a good way, not in some illusion of freedom that is really bondage in disguise. Sometimes, in certain circumstances, we need to conclude, "I'm going to continue my life of freedom in Christ, where most things are allowed, and only a few things are prohibited by God in my best interest." If this offends someone, that's not my goal. But when we always avoid offending someone, it is not healthy except when we are being considerate of a weaker brother or sister in Christ who is still growing, learning, and does not need additional temptations plaguing them. So it depends on the situation. But generally, it is always best to err on the side of caution and try to help others do what is right and build them up in the Lord.

Even Christ didn't live to please himself. Boy, that's for sure. He didn't have a home, had no wealth (except in knowing God, his Father). He just wandered around and helped people, loved them, and set an example. *As the scriptures say, "The insults of those who insult you, oh God, have fallen on me.* The insults intended for God fell ultimately on Jesus, and it cost him his life. That's the degree to which he did not live for himself. He lived to reveal the Father (God) to the world and those around him, to all those people out there slamming God, hating Him, and resisting Him. All this fell on Jesus when he associated himself with God and took a stand.

Things written to teach us (15:4)

Such things were written in the scriptures long ago to teach us. That's why they're there. There's a lot of good instruction in the Old Testament. However, some of it seems to be *man's conflicted view of God*, because there are things I wouldn't want to model my life after, nor would Jesus. If a prophet came to me and said, "You need to go kill everything in town that

breathes, including women and children,” I wouldn't do it. Such a thing would violate my conscience to the very core of my being. I would rightly conclude this is not a true prophet, because I know that Jesus would also never do such a thing. However, it appears that some people would obey such a horrible command. I've asked many people if they would go kill a bunch of innocent little kids if they believed a prophet of God told them to do so. Most people don't want to answer that question, or they hesitatingly admit they would have to somehow obey. Amazing!

This is exactly what was reported in the book of First Samuel in the Old Testament. It reports that God told Samuel (a prophet) to tell Saul (king of Israel) to have his army go and kill the Amalekites, “everything that breathes,” including women and children. So, how does this work? A bunch of big, strong men with swords go through the city slaying everyone they see? Do they chase down little kids running away, screaming, “mommy, mommy!” Do they finish off those who are just wounded who look back with eyes of horror, keeping their mandate to kill everything that breathes? There would be blood everywhere; it would be an extreme act of violence, a disgusting act of genocide! And when it is all over, do these men just go home, have a nice dinner, and go to bed, figuring it was “all in a day's work,” sleeping well with no conscience whatsoever, totally unaffected by committing such atrocities in the name of God? Humans are not made like that. It is one thing to stop an unsolicited threat against your family or country in order to survive and combat evil. That is trauma enough, but a necessary one. It is quite another thing to go and slay masses of humans with no purpose beyond being commanded to do so. That's what Nazi Germany did! What kind of human beings can possibly do such a thing for any reason? Without any question whatsoever, this is not something Jesus would ever engage in, under any circumstances!

So I conclude, and I am confident in it, that the Old Testament, though good for instruction in some places (as Paul

has stated), is at best a *conflicted view of God* by those who collectively authored it. How can we sort out what is right and wrong in such writings? Simple. Jesus is the *gold standard* of right and wrong, as the one who came to reveal the Father (God) and make us more like Him in moral excellence. Even Jesus, according to the Gospel writers, never quoted from the historical books of the Old Testament, where most of the violence by God and man is reported. This would be the books of Joshua through Esther. He may have made references to a few events or persons in these books, but he never quoted from them as he did so frequently from Psalms and Isaiah. Even then, it was usually to identify himself as the coming promised Messiah. Interestingly, Jesus also never quoted from any poetic books (other than Psalms): not from Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, or Song of Solomon.

Jesus also did some quoting from the five books of the law (the Torah: Genesis through Deuteronomy). But he would often qualify his quotes by saying, “You’ve heard it said... but I tell you ...” He was clearly setting himself up over the law as an authority. He never sat down to teach and said, “Open your Bibles to the Old Testament book of First Samuel, where I will explain God’s purpose in all the violence found there,” as many preachers do today. However, there are many amazing stories and illustrations that teach good morals and principles, worthy of our study, found in the Old Testament. We teach kids these stories, and adults as well, hoping they will encourage and build character quality into people’s lives. My wife was a Sunday School teacher for two generations of kids at our church. She was loved and greatly appreciated, and built into the lives of countless kids, good and honorable principles of life that I’m sure have served all of them very well throughout their lives. But some things in the Old Testament are examples of what *not* to do and who *not* to become. To make an accurate distinction, we need Jesus, his life, his teachings, and his demonstration of what real love is in his death

and resurrection! And these scriptures give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises to be fulfilled. Amen, Paul!

Live in complete harmony (15:5)

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you to live in complete harmony with each other, as is fitting for followers of Christ Jesus. What a great statement for all believers, inside and outside of churches. Churches that do this live in harmony with each other. That doesn't mean you have to agree on everything. Paul didn't say, "Agree on everything to live in complete harmony." I recorded a podcast this morning with a husband-and-wife pastoral team. They're much more of the charismatic persuasion, and I don't agree with them on everything. But man oh man, I agree with them on most things, and I agree with them on the *important* things. It was a delightful show because we focused on Christ, God's Grace, and His infinite love for people. For them, a big part of the solution comes from exercising one or more of the five miraculous gifts listed in the New Testament: speaking in tongues, a word of prophecy, and all those kinds of things. And perhaps, it is a big part of God's solution in their lives. I'm good with assuming it is, based on their character quality in Christ. I attend a church where none of these miraculous gifts are practiced or accepted. They believe all the miraculous gifts have ceased, and so they don't practice any of them. I would say that they indeed shouldn't practice them, because for them they have ceased! And yet here at this church with the pastoring couple, the gifts are alive and well. They call themselves *Word-A-Live Fellowship*, and they live up to their name. I visit about once a year because that's all I can handle. But it's all good. I mean, they clearly love God and people, and are not afraid

to show it very exuberantly. They're just a wonderful bunch of folks.

Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept each other, just as Christ has accepted you, so that God will be given glory. Remember that Christ Jesus came as a servant to the Jews in order to show that God is true to the promises He made to their ancestors. That's one of many reasons that Christ came: to show that God is faithful, not just to their ancestors, but faithful to the world. He's going to get into that more as we go on here. He also came so that the Gentiles might give glory to God for His mercies to them. This salvation from God was not just a Jewish thing. It was intended to be a whole world thing, which Paul made clear back in Romans Eleven.

This is what the psalmist meant when he wrote: "For this I will praise you among the Gentiles. I will sing praises to your name." And in another place it is written: "Rejoice with His people, you Gentiles." Paul's picking out some Old Testament passages that probably everybody knew but had never fully understood. He's telling his readers, "Hey, look at what God was saying to the Jews in the Old Testament, that the Gentiles are going to be included in the benefits of the coming Messiah, Jesus, because it's about all humanity. It's not about a special group of people, the Jews. Sure, it was originally about them as a special group of people to bring the Messiah who would save the whole world. But that's the only thing that was special about them. It was not exclusive to everyone else." So, the Gentiles can now rejoice along with the Jews because they're included. And yet, again, praise the Lord, all of you Gentiles; praise Him all you

people of the earth. That's the goal. That's God's intention in coming into the world: to bring everybody to Himself to be saved. In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he said that this is a *mystery* that had been hidden for ages, that Jews and Gentiles alike will become one in Christ. It was a Jew and Gentile thing, an all-humanity thing; this was always God's goal,

And in another place Isaiah said: "The heir to David's throne will come and he will rule over the Gentiles. They will place their hope in Him." So when the Messiah (Jesus) comes, he's not going to rule over just the Jews. This is what Paul's trying to get the Jews away from in their thinking, this *exclusion* idea, and move them into the *inclusion* aspect of salvation. I pray that God, the source of hope, will fill you completely with joy and peace because you trust in him. Now, that is interesting that trusting God is tied together, indelibly linked, with joy, peace, and hope. That's what trusting God brings. Trust isn't about, "You better put your faith in me, or I'm gonna do something bad to you," and then you do it in fear. It's about peace and joy. It is more like, "Hey, welcome home! Come, trust me. It will all be good." What we get is peace, joy, and hope when we put our trust in God, not because we're required to, but because when we do, that's what we'll gain. Then you will overflow with confident hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.

21. We All Need a Reminder (Romans 15:14-22)

You need a reminder (15:14)

I'm fully convinced, my dear brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness. I don't think Paul was saying they were perfect in their behavior or thinking. No one is, and he made that clear way back in Romans Three when he was describing the *problem* all humanity faces. He probably meant that they were generally good people, compared to most of society back then, and were more a part of the *solution* in life (by following Jesus) than part of the *problem* (following the world around them). It only takes a little bit of trouble in life to put us on tilt and make us feel and act like we're totally messed up. Such doubts can dominate a person's life and make it a horrible experience. So Paul wants to encourage them by pointing out the better aspects of their lives, especially compared to the kind of messed-up lives from which most of them emerged.

But even more important is that, in another sense, they really are full of goodness, because of Christ, what he has done for them, and they now live in that reality. He's the one who makes us truly good. Paul underscores this by telling them, *You know these things so well that you can teach others about them.*

This is literally true of all believers. Once we know God, understand where we stand with Him, and experience fellowship with Him because of Jesus, we can teach others without even realizing it – by our lives. Paul didn't say, "Okay, you can't know anything till I come back, teach you, or write you a letter." Instead, he is saying, "You know these things so well, having had your life change so much, you won't be able to help but teach others about it." That's the way truth works. It is not exclusively disseminated at seminary or at church, although these are helpful. The *real* truth can be known and understood by anyone because it is experienced. It's in a person; it's in a relationship with God. Instruction and training might lead you to it, but neither is a replacement for the truth of knowing God. It is very personal, and God made it that way so that we need not be dependent on other humans. Sadly, people slip into different kinds of dependence on *experts*, and such experts are happy to play that dominating role in people's lives. A real expert is always happy to simply point to the truth about knowing God (not just knowing *about* Him), wanting others to establish their own, unique, personal relationship, every bit equal to their own relationship with God. If you find a leader like this, you have found a real leader who serves and simply points the way. Jesus was the ultimate servant-leader. He claimed to be *the way* to God, *the truth* about God, and *the life* in God.

Any teacher who says they need to take a long time to lead you to the truth is stringing you along and making you dependent on them. But if they do as Paul has done in this letter, give the solution in life (Jesus) in half a chapter, so you have it, then spend time explaining details about it so you can better understand what you already have, that is okay. This is a teacher who really serves you by directing you to God to know and depend on Him, and then serves you by giving you helpful, detailed explanations. If they have to explain over and over, never clearly, and always lost in contradictions (like some views of the Trinity), be suspicious

and seek God through the relationship you have with Him. The truth should be pretty straightforward and simple. Paul called his message “the simplicity of the gospel.” He claimed to “preach Christ, and him crucified.” In other words, the *person* and *work* of Jesus; *who* he was and *what* he did. That is pretty simple, straightforward, and sufficient for everyone.

What we just read, in verses 5 through 7, about living in harmony with each other, that’s not complicated. It might be hard to do, but we all know what that means. It is a far cry from trying to understand some trinitarian view of God. We tend to complicate things because it gives us convenient cover and something to argue about, fight about, and see who can be the smartest guy in the room. Avoid such nonsense as much as you can. Paul simply told them that they knew these things so well they could teach each other, implying that he was not ultimately needed. God’s relationship with each person is fully sufficient. Always seek that first.

Even so, I have been bold enough to write about some of these things, knowing that all you need is a reminder. Here, Paul is underscoring their independence from him or any other teacher, so they can be fully dependent on God, who is the ultimate teacher. John, in his first letter, told his readers that they have no teacher but the Holy Spirit. Of course, John realized that he was teaching them by writing his letter. But, in comparison, God is ultimately the one who teaches compared to mere human teaching and does so through His Spirit that dwells in them. Paul is also telling them that what he writes is more of a reminder of what they already know. He is placing himself as helpful but unessential. Any good teacher will do this and defer to God as the ultimate and only essential teacher. Is this how you see God in your life, or are you still dependent on some self-acclaimed expert teacher? Always do your best to discern what motivates them. Teaching is loaded with misplaced, selfish motives. I have, far too

often, seen this in myself over my many years of teaching. God has corrected me many times.

Paul needed a reminder, too. God has many ways of reeling us in and reminding us of what is really important. For Paul, it was his famous “thorn in the flesh” that he mentioned in his second letter to the Corinthians. It is a very instructive passage, near the end of his letter. Check it out sometime! He was also nearly stoned to death on one occasion and shipwrecked on another. These were, undoubtedly, reminders from God about who He is and what is ultimately important in life. These things kept him laser-focused on the Good News message, preventing him from distractions, big and small.

I'm sure God also reminded Paul through other apostles and people. Who knows, perhaps after starting a church, some teenager unknowingly demonstrated an understanding and dependence on God that caused Paul to ponder his own relationship with God. He undoubtedly learned from some of the people that he had won over to Christ. He wasn't just endowed with great spiritual knowledge; he had to learn as he journeyed through life, just as all of us do today. Remember, it took him 14 years preparing to preach the Good News. It is not that the message is so difficult, only that he had a lot to learn, and God took the time to teach him. Perhaps God is preparing you for things He has in store for you someday in the future. Be patient with Him and yourself, as you slowly become all He needs you to be. God didn't send Paul right after his conversion, though I'm sure he was eager to go. Apparently, the desert was Paul's seminary with personal instruction by Jesus.

It is unclear if Jesus spent time with Paul, appearing to him in a resurrected body, or whether it was a more spiritual encounter. Look at how God communicates with us today; it is very personal and spiritual. And, it's a little different for everyone. So God could have revealed things to Paul in this way, or he may have needed (based on the difficult task he had ahead) for Jesus

to meet with him directly so that he would never doubt his special calling. Either way, it was what Paul needed to prepare for the ministry God had for him. Something unique happened to Paul because he's an amazing writer. I think in some ways, Paul's been a greater teacher for me than Jesus. I know that sounds strange, and I don't mean it in any disrespectful way, but when I read the parables, they make me think and there are a lot of good principles in them, but what Paul has written seems more practical and very much needed. When I read through Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Romans, they seem to be loaded with "words to live by," and that's what I do.

But I'm sure Paul would be the first one to say that everything he wrote was based on who Jesus is, what he did on the cross, and what he taught. However, keep in mind that Paul wrote his letters about twenty years before the Gospel writers wrote their accounts. Paul has the earliest writings in the New Testament, even though the Gospels record events that took place earlier. This is an interesting dynamic and makes Paul's writings very foundational in church history.

Why Paul was needed

I think Paul needed to emerge, though many years after Jesus, in order to explain the details of having faith in him. Though he was the Son of God and the promised Messiah, Jesus was actually an Old Testament prophet. However, he was a transitional kind of prophet, often prophesying about himself. I'm not diminishing him at all, but until he went to the cross, the Jewish religion was still all under the law, and there was no *Christianity*, just yet. So in some ways, Jesus was teaching in a period of time that was still under the law of Moses. This is why he often encouraged Jews to keep the law and offer sacrifices required under it, yet he also said that he came to *fulfill* the law! To some degree, the teaching of God's grace in salvation had not been fully revealed (although

God's grace itself had always been present in humanity). There is a huge distinction between knowing *about* God and actually knowing God in a relationship with Him. The Jews before Jesus seemed to know *about* God more than actually knowing Him. However, there are many examples in the Old Testament of those who seemed to have a personal, intimate relationship with God. David was one of these, in spite of his many sins. But isn't this what grace is all about? His 150 psalms are proof of how close he was to his creator. David seemed to have expressed just about every human emotion possible as he revealed his heart and soul in his writings.

It is possible for people to gain a very good understanding of the Bible and all it has to say. I know; I did this for a long time. I knew *all about* God, and I also knew him in a personal way. But there is a big difference between these two kinds of *knowing*, and at some point I had to "close the book" and say, "Dear God, I need to know *you* better!"

I'm not putting Paul above Jesus at all, but Paul's explanation of who Jesus is and what he did, and very little about what he taught, is really key. It's the *application* of who Jesus is that has changed people's lives. Paul brought that perspective consistently. Paul didn't tell people, "Hey, follow me." Well, he said in one place that people should be *imitators* of him. But he wasn't setting himself up as a moral standard. He left that to Jesus and claimed to be the "chief of all sinners." I think he just wanted people to live in Christ, as he had learned to do, so they could experience God fully. He wanted people to know God, walk daily (moment by moment) with Him, and gain spiritually from it. His goal was not to produce an army of people who could out-argue unbelievers using selected proof texts from his writings. He wrote with the goal of people connecting with God through Jesus. I believe if someone read one of his letters and they connected with God in a wonderful, satisfying relationship, he would have no problem with them setting his letter aside and moving on in their

walk with God. Paul was not trying to start a movement in which he could become a supreme leader that everyone admired. He was not trying to start “Christianity” any more than Jesus did. It was always about relationships, with God and others, by living in Christ and allowing him to live in them!

God works in some of the most unexpected ways. Look at this ministry by Paul, who ended up writing more books of the New Testament than anyone else, including the original disciples of Jesus. Here is a guy who considered himself “one born at the wrong time” (not being one of the original twelve disciples), but through whom God had a purpose. He was the outsider, killing Christians, then changed by God and transformed into probably the most compassionate, loving, and influential figure in church history. This just shows me how God can take a life and change it, and it does it in such an unexpected way that I can't help but conclude that this must be God at work. How much has God changed your life? Doesn't it show you that He is there and can be trusted? If someone wanted to make up a Good News story, it would be about Jesus, where his disciples wrote most of the New Testament, building up a big church that everyone flocked to immediately after Jesus departed. Instead, it was rather slow growth until the end of the 4th century, when church and state combined, emerging out of a lot of disagreements within the church.

But the thing that convinces me most about Paul's authenticity is not his claim about the Damascus Road conversion, hearing the voice of Jesus, and being afflicted with scales on his eyes that dropped off a few days later. I wasn't there. I don't know if it happened or not. I suppose it could; God can do anything. Dramatic claims are not proof. It's Paul's *writings* that impress me most. When I read them, God uses them to change my thinking and my life. This is where the rubber meets the road. But why didn't God call ten such *Pauls* into spreading the Good News and starting churches? He just didn't. And why? Maybe

because it's not about growing in *quantity* (numbers) as much as growing in *quality* (relationships). God will do things *slowly and right* rather than *fast and wrong* any day. He is never in a hurry to get things right, especially when He knows His love will win in the end. Paul may have been God's way of proving that He can (and does) save people by grace, beyond Paul's gallant efforts to spread the Good News. God is unlimited in how he communicates to people, and ultimately, it is God who shows people the truth and saves them from sin (not evangelists or programs).

A special messenger (15:15b)

By God's grace, I am a special messenger from Christ Jesus to you Gentiles. I bring you the good news so that I can present you as an acceptable offering to God made holy by the Holy Spirit. When Paul talks about making somebody an *offering* to God, it's symbolic of the Old Testament offerings they were already familiar with. He is using things they know to teach them things they don't know. This is really the only way anything can be taught, by starting with familiar things and proceeding from there, helping people make the transition into new and better ideas. He is telling them that they are a good kind of offering and that he is delivering them into God's presence, where they will be safe and secure. Isn't this exactly what happened to us? And it is not just dumping people off before God, but a delivering of people who have been prepared by the working of the Holy Spirit in their lives. When you came to Christ by faith, didn't you sense a preparation in your heart and a changed mind that allowed you to engage with God in a new and better way? This is what Paul is talking about: we are an offering to God, prepared (made holy) by God Himself through His Spirit. Notice that every aspect of our salvation is the work of God, before, during, and after our salvation experience.

So, I have reason to be enthusiastic about all that Christ Jesus has done for you in my service to God. Yet I dare not boast about anything except what Christ has done through me, bringing the Gentiles to God through my message and how I worked among them. Reading this, you kind of get a feel for how Paul operates and how he brings his Good News message. He's a very compassionate, caring, loving person. He gets a little rowdy once in a while in his writings, but overall, he seems to have the best of motives. He has a lot of insight into the meekness of the Christian faith for a guy who was once an arrogant Pharisee. It took 14 years to get him straightened out by God! This is why he says, "I dare not boast about anything except what Christ has done through me."

They were convinced by the power of miraculous signs and wonders, and by the power of God's Spirit. That's pretty much what convinced them: miraculous signs and wonders. People always want some kind of demonstrable proof. Jesus scolded people of his day for always seeking such things, yet he performed them anyway, knowing this is how weak people tend to be when it comes to faith. But God's ultimate goal for people seems to be for them to trust Him without some kind of visible proof. He wants us to trust Him because of *who He is*, not just because He can put on a show. Good relationships are built on trust, not tinsel. However, it is always a mixture of what we see and what we believe, and God knows this. So He often brings events, situations, and people into our lives to reinforce our faith. God has done this many times in my life, but only a few times in ways I could not explain. I am thankful for these, but most of my faith was carved out by God working in my daily life over the past 75 years, through working, raising kids, being married, and interacting with friends.

I know people who believe God performs miraculous signs today and that the spectacular gifts described in the New Testament are alive and well. It could be that God does such things all the time, and only some people are able to see them for what they are. Then again, perhaps He just performs them in certain places and certain times as they are needed. But back in Paul's day, people were convinced by the miraculous signs and wonders, along with the power of God's spirit. It wasn't *just* these external evidences, although they were really helpful. There must also be more important *internal* evidence that only God can bring to each person. This is what really counts and should always play a bigger role in your life.

If your spiritual life always depends on somebody else, the right guy that went to the right seminary, reading all the officially approved ancient documents, interpreting them correctly, doing word studies, and "rightly dividing truth from error" in accordance with some local authority, you may actually be spiritually bankrupt, missing out on the spiritual life God has for you. It is not that these kinds of things are, in and of themselves, wrong; I engage in many of them myself. But when it becomes blind trust in other people who claim to be *experts* ordained by God, we can lose our way, spiritually. God has always intended for people to know Him, directly, intimately, and securely, not via some human mediator – except for Jesus, who mediates in a way that allows us to have that *direct* relationship with God. Don't miss it!

It's good to have teachers and resources, but the bottom line is: what's going on inside you, what have you learned? What is God teaching you? In some ways, God is teaching everyone the same things. People who don't know God are interacting with Him daily, in life itself, as they navigate through all the challenges and aspirations set before them. One way or another, whether we attach religious concepts to it or not, everyone learns the same lessons in life: that life is short, is temporary, that nothing in this

material world ultimately satisfies us, that the coming generations of people will not know or care what we did, and that only knowing God can have *real* meaning in our lives. People may not be consciously aware of all this, yet they are slowly learning these things as they approach their final years. Ask any old person, and they will tell you this is basically true, even though they do not attach any aspect of *God* to what they have learned. We are all interacting with God when we interact with life. This cannot be helped, and God set it up this way.

God teaches each one of us what we need to learn at any given time in our lives. It's going to be different from what someone else needs, or the same things in a different season. Sometimes God teaches people things in a different order. And so, we all compare notes with each other in the form of social dialogs (which are often just our complaints), and we mistakenly think others are not getting it right, because they experience something different from us. But God's always at work in people. These folks Paul was writing to were convinced by the power of miraculous signs, wonders, and by the power of God's Spirit.

The Good News fully presented (15:19b)

Paul brought a message, and this is the way he did it: *I have fully presented the good news of Christ from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum.* Illyricum was a province of the ancient Roman Empire, located between Athens and Rome along the Mediterranean Sea. The distance between Jerusalem and Illyricum was about 1300 miles. This was a huge distance in Paul's day, and it represents the span of his missionary journeys, which covered most of the Western, civilized world established by Alexander the Great some 500 years earlier. *My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started*

by somebody else. This was the key to Paul's success. If there was a church in some particular location, that was good enough for him, and he'd go somewhere else where there wasn't any. In fact, he had people who would preach the gospel just to compete with him, get back at him in some way, and cause him grief. But his response was not to retaliate in any way. He was satisfied, no matter their motives against him, they're preaching about Jesus, even if they're doing it selfishly and trying to compete with him. He just wanted the message of Christ to get out so people could hear, believe, and be saved from the sins that were destroying them. This is one reason why the Good News spread so quickly and thoroughly. Paul did not get distracted by petty squabbles and ego problems that are so common among humans, back then as well as today.

My father-in-law, my wife's dad, was a missionary pastor who liked to start churches. He would always go where there was no existing church. He even started one in Thornton, CA., where there were no local police, only an occasional county sheriff patrol passing through. Anyway, he would start a church by going into the community, knocking on doors, and inviting people to the local fire station, which he would rent to hold Sunday services. My wife was one of five kids. In a small, nowhere town like that, they *were* the youth group! He would then slowly build the church up to a few dozen people. But as soon as it got bigger, in a year or two, people got comfortable, the newness of the ministry faded away, and politics began to emerge. It was always inevitable, and it took a different kind of pastor to deal with people-problems. So he would help them call a new pastor, and would move on with his family to a new home in a new small town, to escape all the building programs and in-fighting over the color of choir robes! People would ask my wife where she was from. Her answer was, "Well, name a place."

Starting churches was Paul's passion, too. However, he sometimes had to deal with the inevitable people-problems that

always emerge in any gathering. He reports a lot of such problems in his first letter to the Corinthians, but used these problems as teaching opportunities, just as all good, loving pastor-shepherds do today. He just kept starting spiritual fires everywhere. This is reflected in his claim, "My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else."

I have been following the plan spoken of in the scriptures where it says: Those who have never been told about him will see, and those who have never heard of him will understand." That would be the promised Messiah, the anointed (official) one that would come, and for Paul, that was Jesus. *In fact, my visit to you has been delayed a long time because I have been preaching in these various places.* Paul was a busy boy, and the reason he hadn't come to Rome was that it's far away, past Illyricum, which was the extent of his ministry so far. Plus, he was preaching in many other places, which was delaying any trip to Rome. If you study the Acts of the Apostles, you'll find out that the journey to Rome at the end of Paul's life was quite a long boat ride, including a shipwreck. When he finally made the trip, it was under Roman guards, fulfilling his request to plead his case for his imprisonment before Caesar, since he was a Roman citizen.

22. I Have Finished My Work (Romans 15:23-33)

I have finished my work (15:23)

I have finished my work in these regions, and after all these years of waiting, I'm eager to visit you. I don't think his work at any one place took very long. Paul didn't take people through some kind of seminary training. I think he told them who Jesus was and the basics about him, much like what he has done here in his letter to the Romans. He just wanted to stay in touch with them as their mentor and spiritual guide. It was a difficult task because they didn't have internet or cell phones as we so conveniently do today. Paul had to travel around and revisit many places that needed any follow-up. However, he wrote a lot of letters that were copied and circulated around in all the established churches. However, just as we struggle today reading his letters and have a lot of questions, so did these folks back then. Eventually, he had to revisit churches to clear things up and resolve people-problems to keep them from self-destructing. He makes many references to this kind of problem-solving in most of his thirteen letters.

I'm planning to go to Spain, and when I do, I'll stop off in Rome. After I have enjoyed your fellowship for a little while, you can provide for my journey. But before I come, I must go to Jerusalem to take a gift to the believers there. The believers in Macedonia and Achaia have eagerly taken up an offering for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem. These are the early days in the church, when Christians would help fellow believers, even in other towns where they didn't know them. This is the first *social program* whereby people, out of sheer love for God and others, took care of each other's needs. It is a good kind of "socialism." It is where the community of believers voluntarily takes care of one another, and where those who have more provide the funds needed to those who have less. Paul, in this situation, was the carrier for that transfer of funds that were already taken up as an offering for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem.

They were glad to do this because they felt they owed them a real debt. Since the Gentiles received the spiritual blessings of the Good News from the believers in Jerusalem, these Macedonians felt that the least they could do in return was to help them financially. So apparently, there was this *spiritual gain* (via receiving the Good News), prompting them to financially help those who shared that Good News. Perhaps they spent a lot of money on missionary efforts that eventually found some appreciated success. That goes on today. When the Good News goes out and finds success by changing lives, the recipients often want to be a financial part of seeing such efforts continue.

As soon as I have delivered this money and completed this good deed of theirs, I will come see you on my way to Spain. I am sure that when I come, Christ will richly bless

our time together. Dear brothers and sisters, I urge you, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to join my struggle by praying to God on my behalf. Do this because of your love for me, given to you by the Holy Spirit. That's not Paul being self-centered; he's just saying, "Hey, I need prayer, and I need spiritual support and love to continue the ministry to which I've been called."

Pray that I will be rescued from those in Judea who refuse to obey God. Pray also that the believers there will be willing to accept the donation I'm taking to Jerusalem. Wow, there's a chance they won't accept it? It could be pride that motivates them to refuse help, or it could be that they know they will do okay and prefer the money to go where it is most needed. We have both kinds of people operating in the church today. Have you noticed? Then, by the will of God, I will be able to come to you with a joyful heart, and we will be an encouragement to each other. But for now, may God who gives us his peace be with you all. Amen. That's kind of the end of Paul's letter to the Romans. However, he provides a post-log that will continue into Romans Sixteen, his final chapter.

The significance of prayer

After reading all these passages, I couldn't help but wonder, "Where is Paul's faith? Isn't God going to take care of him, whether people pray or not? Does he need people praying for him in order for God to work His perfect will? Prayer has always been a mysterious thing for me. If God is all-wise, all-powerful, and always does the right thing, why do we need to pray and ask for His perfect will? My ultimate conclusion is that we don't *need* to. Prayer is not required to obtain God's perfect will for us. But prayer might affect *when* we get it, *how* we get it, *why*, and *where*.

These things matter, but not ultimately. The worst thing that can happen when we don't pray is that we miss out on some good things in this life, and we'll experience greater frustration, pain, fear, and guilt than needed.

It is normal to pray, talk to God, and say, "Please help me." Even Jesus prayed such prayers, asking, "Father, if this pain I'm about to go through can be avoided, that's what I desire. But I desire more that your will be done, no matter what." I think prayer has the main job of changing the person praying more than changing the circumstances around them. Prayer was never intended to be a *genie in the bottle* that we rub and get our three wishes. Nor is it some kind of magic wand to wave and get our way. Remember what Paul wrote back in Romans Eight, one of many passages located in the very heart of the New Testament? "The Holy Spirit is always praying within us and for us, with groanings more meaningful and accurate than anything we could ever do." This is God, taking up all the slack in who we are as finite, limited, weak beings.

Sometimes I feel a compulsion to pray for somebody else, even though I know God's going to always do the right and best thing whether I pray or not. It's not because I think He doesn't know what to do unless I tell him, or that He's too dumb, unwise, or lazy to get the job done if I don't pray. Perhaps prayer is God's way of letting us *participate* in what He is doing, in a very meaningful and heartfelt way. I think prayer is, ultimately, a communion thing with God, knitting our hearts together with His, growing closer to Him. It is more for us than for God! People who come out of a strong religious background, especially an intense legalistic one, feel like prayer has to be done in some formal way, according to some man-made formula, making it yet another ritual intended to *appease* God. If this is what prayer really is for them, if they get a lot out of it, and it makes them feel closer to God, then by all means, this is what they should do. It's certainly not up to me (or anyone else) to judge and decide for

them what they should or should not do in such a highly personal matter. However, if I get a welcome chance to share, I will always suggest that this might be a lesser form of prayer than they can experience and that it could be that God has something greater for them in it.

When someone is heavy on your heart, or you're just thinking about them, isn't that just as much a prayer as any formal, fold-the-hands, bow-the-knee ritual?. Must we open and close each prayer with some specified words that officially start and end it? Maybe prayer comes more from the heart than it does from the mind, though it must *include* our mind, since we must first think about what we will say. Perhaps real prayer originates in their heart, long before words are chosen to deliver it. Perhaps in this way the heart and mind work together, each one doing what it alone can do. It's easy to get that reversed and use your mind to tell the heart what to feel. Maybe for some people this is the correct order, or maybe some prayers are of this nature. Every person and every situation is different; keep this in mind. I've been to prayer meetings in my younger days, and I was asked what they could pray for. Well, I didn't really want to share with the whole group my most intimate and personal concerns, so I would think up something to allow me to fulfill my duty as a fellow prayer warrior and ask them to pray for Aunt Suzie, who has cancer (or some other such impersonal and safe request). Have you ever done this? I don't think it is *wrong* if it's an honest prayer, but is it *best*?

So for me, I've learned to view prayer as one of God's magnificent gifts to be experienced and enjoyed, rather than a duty to be performed to gain approval. It is the means by which we can have communion and fellowship with God, and perhaps the less formal it is, the more real it is! In what way did we want our precious little kids to address us with their concerns? I imagine that for early Christians, the first thing they did was ask God for something. This is normal, and it is what we all tend to

do, naturally. God probably chuckles and says, “We’ll see about that, but let’s get to know each other first so our communication will be more real and more effective. That’s what I want.” And that’s what prayer does when it is best. Sometimes we pray without understanding, and when we do that, prayer becomes the means by which God helps us to gain more understanding about the situation we are in. This might take a lot of time and prayer. This is exactly why prayer needs to be a lifestyle more than a ritual. There needs to be an always-ready-to-pray mindset that serves us well in relating to God. Paul even suggested that we “pray without ceasing.” Does that mean spending 24/7 on our knees with our eyes closed and our hands folded? Hardly. It’s something better than that, much better. It is *constant* prayer, like breathing. It is not burdensome; it is quite natural, always talking to God. I’ve been caught doing this out loud in the car, being heard by another driver. Oh well, I can’t seem to help it.

Sometimes God puts someone on my heart. Sometimes I know why, other times I don’t. I just pray for them, whether I know why or not. I don’t necessarily call them up right away, but over a period of time, I might talk to them and say, “Hey, you’ve been on my mind, what’s going on?” Sometimes, to my surprise, they are going through a tough time, and my prayer was very timely; there was no way to know this at the time I prayed. When I do not know what they specifically need, I know they need to feel God’s presence in their lives, so I often pray for this. At other times, I wake up in the middle of the night with someone on my heart, and I pray for them without even knowing what’s going on. But do I need to know in order to pray for them? No. God knows, and I just know I need to pray. There is always a peace I experience after I do. This, I believe, is one way in which God lets us *participate* in what He is doing in people’s lives. I know, and have sensed when other people are praying for me. Perhaps it brings a closeness that can’t be gained in any other way!

Praying for others unburdens me in a good way and gets it off my heart (until next time, or the next person comes to mind). But this is a good kind of cycle of genuine burden and genuine relief. There is no worry or stress in it, only joyous concern, knowing God is at work in my life and theirs. This process puts my mind at ease and my emotions in check with God, where they belong. Prayer changes us, and there is some kind of special connection that happens when we pray for somebody. It does make a difference with them, in some spiritual way. It's not that God's going to change his plan, but he lets us take part in it in a way that is beyond our understanding. That's okay; we don't need to fully understand when we know that God does!

23. True Friends (Romans 16:1-27)

We now start Paul's final chapter in the longest letter of the thirteen he authored. In a way, he has already finished this letter as far as his problem-solution-explanation-results presentation is concerned. This is more of a postscript, containing a lot of personal communications. When we started Romans, it soon became obviously more of an *essay* than a mere letter. It has been pretty generic in nature, but now Paul conveys particulars about certain people. It's very personal. It demonstrates that there's a lot going on in people's lives; life is not just about theology and doctrine. Paul has saved his most personal communications for the end, and it's amazing how many people he mentions.

Greet, greet, greet (16:1)

He starts out in chapter 16, verse one with: *I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is a deacon in the church in Cenchrea.* Hey, immediately we hear about a lady who is a deacon in the church. She seems to be the first person that comes to his mind. The deacon position came about early on in church development, long before Paul came on the scene, as a result of overwhelming physical, material, and financial needs emerging as the church grew in numbers. Although in many ways, the ultimate answers to life are spiritual in nature, people live and struggle daily in a very physical world. So, meeting these kinds of needs is very

important. In fact, often, it was the meeting of these physical needs (feeding the poor and bringing healing to them) that became the gateway to opening their hearts to God.

Welcome her in the Lord, as one who is worthy of honor among God's people. Help her and whatever she needs, for she has been helpful to many, and especially to me. Give my greetings to Priscilla and Aquila. Priscilla is another prominent lady in the church, along with her husband Aquila. Paul puts her name first, which is not what we tend to do when we introduce a couple to others in our modern society. Don't you tend to introduce or mention a couple with the man's name given first? I've been trying to reverse this more in my references. They are my coworkers in the ministry of Christ Jesus. In fact, they once risked their lives for me. I am thankful to them, and so are all the Gentile churches. Also, give my greetings to the church that meets in their home. There is probably a long list of people who helped and protected Paul in his ministry. He got himself in a lot of trouble over the years. Someone once forced him to escape down a back wall in a basket. This was hard for him because retreating was not his style. But they did this to save his life, and God permitted it. On another occasion, someone used his own belt to tie him up as a demonstration of what would happen to him if he pursued a certain endeavor. Paul was a very strong-willed fellow, but this is what it took for him to accomplish all he did over his lifetime. God chose the right man for the job, but sometimes he needed to be protected from his own tenacity.

Greet my dear friend Epenetus. He was the first person from the province of Asia to become a follower of Christ. When Paul set out on his first missionary tour, not knowing exactly what to expect but driven by an inner compulsion from God, his first

converts must have been very special to him. Do you have anyone whom you influenced back when you started out on your journey with God? Were they special to you, too, being those of whom you will never forget? Do you remember the personal encouragement you experienced because of their positive response to the Good News you shared with them? In Paul's day, not too many people wanted to be the first on the block to become a "Christian" in a world of hostile paganism that persecuted those who did not offer sacrifices to *their* gods! So Epenetus must have been a very special guy. He must have had some special insight and something spiritual going on in order to be one of Paul's first converts. It makes me think about my wife's parents who went into communities with no church, knocked on doors, inviting what few people would come to a newly started, make-shift church in a fire-station building. How encouraged did they feel when someone said, "Yes," surrounded by so many "no" responses?

Give my greetings to Mary. This was a very common name, including the mother of Jesus and one of his most faithful and dedicated followers. *She has worked so hard for your benefit. Greet also Andronicus and Junia, my fellow Jews who were in prison with me.* This kind of relationship, one of experiencing hardship with others, is always unforgettable and appreciated. Have you ever had a faithful friend who went through a season of difficulties with you, always there when you needed them? This is when you find out who your real friends are. There is never any lack of "friends" in times of accomplishment and success. These friends endured prison with Paul. He may have met them there, or they may have all been imprisoned together for the same cause. Paul spent a lot of time in prison. Someone recently asked me if Paul had a copy of the Bible with him in prison. I thought about this and told him, "He

was working on it,” because Paul wrote many of the letters that ended up in the New Testament collection from prison. *They are highly respected among the apostles and became followers of Christ before I did.* Wow. When Paul came to Christ, there were many people who came before he did. He only originated the Gentile expansion of the Christian faith; Jesus was the ultimate founder.

Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord. Greet Urbanus, our co-worker in Christ, and my dear friend Stachys. Greet Apelles, a good man whom Christ approves. And give my greetings to the believers from the household of Aristobulus. Greet Herodion, my fellow Jew. Greet the Lord's people from the household of Narcissus. Give my greetings to Tryphena and Tryphosa, the Lord's workers, and to dear Persis, who has worked so hard for the Lord. Greet Rufus, whom the Lord picked out to be his very own, and also his dear mother, who has been a mother to me. Look at all the personal stuff he's going through, desiring that all these people receive a warm, heartfelt greeting from him. These are all people in Rome, a city he had not even visited. Yet, there are so many there with whom he had contact in the past. Perhaps many of them migrated to Rome since it was becoming a central location for Christianity as it developed. History indicates that Peter went there and became the head of that church in the later years of his life. From there, Christianity became more Western-oriented, where the Latin culture and language eventually became dominant. But always keep in mind that it was the Eastern church, in Galatia, Palestine, and Egypt, that originally dominated based on the Greek language and culture. The church existed in these two wings until about 1200 AD, when they split into two groups that still exist today.

Paul can't help but attach to each name some meaningful, personal thing about them. I hope you, too, have a long list of special friends from the past who were instrumental in your life. Some, undoubtedly, were mentors who helped you grow in the Lord. Others were friends who were co-journeymen in life, helping each other along the way. Then there are probably those you tried to help but couldn't, leaving you a bit discouraged, but knowing that in due time God would bring someone else into their life to continue where you left off!

Give my greetings to Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers and sisters who meet with them. Give my greetings to Philologus, Julia, Nereus, and his sister, and to Olympas and all the believers who meet with them. I don't think Paul's just trying to think up something to write. These are all people he can't help but mention as those in who have been important in his life. Look at how many people are meeting with each other in little households, small groups of people that Paul helped to get started. Greet each other in Christian love. All the churches of Christ send you their greetings. I find this whole section really refreshing. After all the doctrine, teaching, and exhorting Paul gave for fifteen chapters of his letter, his bottom line, his final thing, is about people and their lives, how they interact, how important they are, and how much they love each other and him. These are real people with real names; over two dozen of them. Each one could tell a story if time were allowed. But their stories are like ours, so we already know what they have all experienced.

We are down to the very end of Paul's letter to the Romans. And now, after he's just talked about people, how important they are to him, he's now going to give his final, closing words. Sometimes when I'm evaluating a book, I'll go to the end and see

how the author closes it. I don't do this when reading a novel because that would spoil it and remove the intrigue that the author wanted to bring to me as a reader. But if I want to know what's *really* on an author's mind, I go read how they end their book. I guarantee they will not resist the temptation to say what is most important to them while they still have a chance. There is always, in every person, a desire to sum up their ideas in the best possible way. They want readers to be left with where they stand on things. So expect that here with Paul.

Watch out for divisions (16.17)

And now I make one more appeal. My dear brothers and sisters, watch out for people who cause divisions and upset people's faith by teaching things contrary to what you've been taught. Okay, good advice: watch out for the troublemakers and religious bullies. This has always been a major theme for Paul ever since his first letter, which he wrote to the Galatians. (See my commentary titled, *Never Going Back!* for details). There are two kinds of troublemakers. There are those who don't mean to cause trouble; they're just clumsy and unaware. It's their personality, it's their temperament. They say what they think. They get their mouth going before their brain goes; you know this type? Some of them are really nice people. Be patient with them. They usually respond to loving-kindness, and it may take them a while to see and correct their ways

Then, there are troublemakers who act intentionally and sometimes viciously. They want to cause trouble. They've got an axe to grind. But the cool thing is God uses everyone, so be as patient as possible with them, too. However, sometimes you gotta fight fire with fire. But make it *refining* fire, as God does! I appreciate the fact that there are a lot of good people who don't ever cause any trouble at all. But I also don't know how much

they accomplish in life, since accomplishments are generally a result of actions. However, I thank God for them, because if everybody were on edge, going after things, and constantly fighting, it would be even worse than it is now. We have enough of that going on. God provides more calm people than rowdy ones in order to maintain reasonable stability

Some people are struggling with who they are and with what's going on in life. It often comes out as they clash with other people. I have taken my turn creating problems. I never mean to, but I have blind spots that God is still working on, and the best solution is to have trusted friends who can gently and faithfully point them out. Always listen to such friends, and then take what they say to God for His final take on life. It's always a test. Will we love people unconditionally? That doesn't mean you let them take over. Sometimes we have to do *tough love*. But will you love them and say, "You know what? Let's find a way to help each other do well in life." We need to do this, even if it costs us something.

I must share a joke. You may have heard this one, but it illustrates an important truth about all of us. A helicopter had just rescued a man who was stranded and alone on a desert island. As they flew away, the pilot looked down and asked, "What are those three buildings I see down there?" The rescued man answered, "Oh, the first one is my home, and the second one is where I go to church." The pilot paused and pondered for a moment, then asked, "Well, what's that third building?" Without hesitation, the man answered, "That's where I *used to* go to church!" He is alone, on a desert island, and he still experienced a church split! It's funny because we can almost see this happening with what we know about people, including ourselves. That's about how silly we are sometimes. So Paul makes one more appeal: watch out for the people who cause divisions and upset people's faith. However, not everyone who expresses something contrary to someone's established creed is causing trouble.

Stay away from them. Such people are not serving Christ our Lord. They are serving their own personal interests. By using smooth talk and glowing words, they deceive innocent people. There's a time to stay away from them, but there is also a time to try to embrace them, help them, and restore them to God, which is always God's goal. Remember, Paul talked about this kind of thing earlier in this letter, helping his readers think through when to change how they live to accommodate somebody struggling with something, and when to look them in the eye and say. "Brother (or Sister), it's time for you to learn Christian liberty, because you're just living a legalistic life." It just depends on the situation. There are also times we need to tell people we can't be involved in what they're doing; they try to control everybody in every situation, disrupting the gathering of believers.

My wife used to teach 2nd grade, and she'd always have one kid who made it all about himself. Even if he got himself in trouble, he didn't care; he just wanted all the attention. We don't have anybody like that in politics, do we? Actually, yes! I'm not picking on anyone in particular, but there are a lot of people like that out there, and some of them are starved for attention, even if it generates bad news about themselves. They cannot stand to be anything less than the center of attention. My wife had to be careful how she disciplined such kids, because it could feed their desire to grab all the focus in a classroom. That kid could suck up all of the oxygen in the room in a second-grade class by acting up, so she had to learn some creative ways to deal with them. Sometimes you get them involved in a project, and sometimes you call the parents and say, "Come and get your son and deal with him; I can't allow him to ruin the class for all the other kids." But the goal is always to find unity with people, if they will allow it and work to achieve it. Paul's conclusion is, "Such people are not serving Christ our Lord. They are serving their own personal

interests. “That’s true, and we can only do so much to try to help them. At some point, though, it becomes God’s problem, and He is the only one who can fix people permanently and forever.

But everyone knows that you are obedient to the Lord. This makes me very happy. I want you to be wise in doing what is right and stay innocent of wrong. That's a good general principle. I had a pastor whom I grew up under, and he often said, “Do what's right till the stars fall from the sky. Always do what's right!” Of course, there are some things in life that we call “the gray area” where it is harder to discern what is right and wrong. Paul deals with these special cases in Romans Thirteen. But we usually know what's right and wrong. We know when we're doing what's wrong, and he's telling his readers to be wise and stay innocent. We know when we're being selfish; we know when we're telling a lie. We know when we're stealing something, and Paul simply says, “Don't go there.” Perhaps it is wise to do without something if there's any doubt. He ends with this: *May the grace of our Lord Jesus be with you.* That is the best protection any of us has. Receive what God is giving you by His grace!

The secret plan revealed (16:21)

Timothy, my fellow worker, sends you his greetings, as do Lucius, Jason, and Sosipater, my fellow Jews. Paul's got a lot of Jewish friends who are in Christ and in ministry. Even though he's the “apostle to the Gentiles,” he was still connected with Jewish people who were followers of Jesus. I, Tertius, the one writing this letter for Paul, send my greetings, too, as one of the Lord's followers. Wow, he's got somebody that's a scribe for him, doing the actual writing. Paul, when he got older, may have had problems with his vision. He might have had

trouble writing, so he would have a scribe write for him, even though it was *his* letter from *his* heart and *his* ideas. *Gaius says hello to you. He is my host and also serves as host to the whole church. Erastus, the city treasurer, sends his greeting, and so does our brother Quartus.* Paul is passing on a message from other fellow believers. And that's what I like about this final chapter of Paul's letter. There's a whole lot of human connection and interrelationships that are really very important. This is the grand conclusion of his letter!

Now all glory to God who is able to make you strong, just as my Good News says. Paul knew that the Good News was *God's* Good News and not his own. But he made it personal, as this last chapter demonstrates. *This message about Jesus Christ has revealed his plan for you Gentiles – a plan kept secret from the beginning of time.* He's referring to what he has said, over and over in this letter: that God's plan is for all humanity, for the whole world, for the Jews and the Gentiles, is that nobody is excluded. That's God's goal, and I always ask people, "It's very clear in the New Testament that God sent His Son into the world to save humanity; to save all sinners. The question is, did he pull it off? Is he big enough? Is he loving enough? Does he care enough? Is he powerful enough to save the whole world, which was obviously his goal? Can he eventually do that? Did He fail in some way?" I don't believe he did.

But now, as the prophets foretold, and as the eternal God has commanded, this message is made known to all Gentiles everywhere, so that they too might believe and obey him. Paul is saying this message is for all people, everywhere, so that they can believe and obey and gain from it. If you don't believe and obey, you're not gonna engage with God, enjoy fellowship with Him, and live a better life. That's going to be what's lost. God's

not going to get ticked off and say, “How dare you not believe. I’m gonna do something terrible to you, forever.” No way. We instinctively know this is not necessary. *All glory to the wise God, through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.* He ends with that. Amen means, “I’m in agreement with God.”

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