

4 Living as God's people (Romans 12)

What does it look like to live the gospel? If the gospel is the good news that God has raised up his Son as Lord of all, what kind of community lives under his leadership? Romans 12–16 answers that question.

Romans 1–8 explained the faithfulness of God: God-doing-right by providing his Christ to lead Israel and the nations back into his leadership. This good news calls us to give him our faithfulness, and out of faithfulness to him the world is set right in the Messiah and does right by God. God's solution to evil is: faith[fulness] => right[eousness].

Romans 9–11 then began describing this new community in the Messiah. It's no longer the people of God versus the nations of the world. Although many in Israel rejected God's Messiah, God never rejected them. What he did was to expand the definition of "the people of God" to include the nations who give their allegiance to God's Anointed. So "the people of God" are now defined by being in the Messiah rather than in Jacob's family tree. The nations need to hear this good news, and that's what Paul is doing.

Any questions on Romans 9–11 before we proceed to Chapter 12?

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4.1 A new kind of community (12:1-2)

Since God has redefined the world in Christ, Jews and gentiles live together as one people in the Messiah. That's the essence of Romans 12–16. The *therefore* at the start of Chapter 12 indicates this is a consequence of everything in the first book so far:

Romans 12:1-2 (NIV)

¹ Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

These verses are favourites. We hear them quoted, preached, and taught in so many settings. God's mercy. Our bodies. Living sacrifices. Pleasing God. Worship. Renewed minds. God's will. What stand outs for you?

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Much of the teaching on this text is individual: my relationship with God, my worship, my mind, God's will for me. That's part of the story for every believer. But this way of thinking follows the pattern of the world where everything revolves around me.

The *you* is plural, like *brothers and sisters* and *bodies*. **God's mercy** is not just saving me; the astounding response of our heavenly sovereign to the world that killed his Son is rescuing the world in his Anointed, raising him out of death to reign over us. We who have faith in his leadership are called to do what Jesus did: offering our bodies as a gift to God also.

For the Jewish believers in Rome, this was a shocking thought. The Torah defined who could offer sacrifices and what gifts would be *holy and pleasing to God*. Eleven of Israel's twelve tribes could not offer sacrifices, and gentiles were not allowed anywhere near the holy altar because they would defile it. That would be invalid and improper worship.

But Paul's gospel says that what God has done in Christ has completely reframed the people of God. It's no longer Jacob's physical descendants who are the holy family (9:6-8). God has grafted the peoples of other nations into his holy people (11:17-24), so all the recipients of Paul's letter are *loved by God and called his holy people* (1:7).

Everyone who calls Jesus Lord (because God raised him from the dead) is rescued from the defiled world (10:9-13), children reborn into God's holy family by the Spirit, and therefore heirs of God's promises that are fulfilled in the Messiah (8:14-17).

That makes us *brothers and sisters* in Father's family, priests who respond to our Lord by doing as he did: *offering our bodies* as sacrificial gifts to God, for the rescue of the world. Whether we're Jewish or gentile, such gifts are *holy and pleasing to God*.

Offering ourselves to God is our *true and appropriate worship*. Churches often think of *worship* as singing songs. A "worship" team leads the worship (i.e. the singing), and that's a big part of what we do when we gather. Singing in church is rarely mentioned in the New Testament.

In fact, the word *worship* here could just as well be translated as *service*. (NASB, KJV, ASV, AMP, CEB, GNB). Offering our bodies to God each day is how we *serve* God as our heavenly sovereign. When Israel was enslaved to Pharaoh, they served him by showing up for work each day—offering their bodies to him in service. In the same way, the world was enslaved to Sin, but in Christ we have been set free to serve our true sovereign. So we don't show up to work for Sin anymore; we offer ourselves as a gift to God in his service because we've given our allegiance to his Messiah (6:16-22). What we do for God is *our true and appropriate service* because he's earth's true and appropriate sovereign.

Your thoughts on verse 1?

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This way of thinking reshapes us as humans. Instead of being *moulded to the culture this present age* expects of us, we'll have *a new way of thinking*, one that leads us to *experiment with and enjoy* what God has always intended the world to be: *his good, pleasing, perfect will* for his earthly realm (verse 2).

That needs unpacking. What aspects of the present era are still shaping us? What new ways of thinking will shape us as God intends, rebuilding us as a family doing what our Father approves? Everything in this chapter addresses that question: living for community rather than self (verses 3-8), and giving love instead of getting even (verses 9-21). That's what God in Christ is doing to restore the world.

4.2 Organic life in Christ (12:3-8)

Romans 12:3-5 (NIV)

³ For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. ⁴ For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it's thinking of yourself less. It's not comparing yourself to everyone; it's discovering the God-gifting in everyone.

The pattern of this age is self-promotion, living my best life, being my best self.

The renewed mind values the contribution each person makes to the community that exists in the Messiah's leadership. God is weaving us into a living tapestry that's so much richer than the beauty of any individual thread. The vibrancy of God's handiwork is the love each thread shows for the others, since we're in Christ together.

That doesn't mean suppressing your strengths; it means offering what God has given you to enhance how the community functions in Christ:

Romans 12:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us.
If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith;
⁷ if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach;
⁸ if it is to encourage, then give encouragement;
if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently;
if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.

The New Testament has three lists of gifts: gifts from God (here), gifts from Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13), and gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:7-11). You can flatten them into a single list, but it's better to read each list as part of the story in its context. In Romans 12, the point is that God has not cut us out so we're all the same. Each of us has a natural bent that represents part of the creativity of God. None of us has it all, but in contributing our bit to the whole we hear the richness of God's music among us.

Everyone in the Christ-community has the Messiah's Spirit (8:9), so everyone can **prophesy**. But some are especially gifted to hear what God is saying (the word of the LORD) or to see what God is doing (visionary insight/dream) and to declare it so the people of God recognize what God is calling us to do in this moment.

In the same way, we all **serve** each other, but for some this is a calling.

We all **teach** each other, but some empower people to do as God instructs.

We all **encourage**, but some are gifted to lift people up and cheer them on.

We all **contribute**, but some embody God's generosity.

We all **lead**, but some are gifted to see how each person contributes and diligently use that skill so we work well together.

We all reflect God's heart of **mercy**, but some are gifted with empathy.

One way to look at these gifts is to see how we naturally respond when something happens that we didn't expect. Imagine I asked for a glass of water, and the person who brought it dropped the glass, so we have broken glass and water everywhere. How do you react?

- a) The *prophet* is calling for another glass of water.
- b) The *server* has found a broom and mop, before anyone gets glass in their feet or slips on the wet floor.
- c) The *teacher* is figuring out how this happened, so we can all learn from it.
- d) The *encourager* is lifting the person up, so they won't feel useless in front of everyone.
- e) The *giver* has found another glass of water to replace the one that was lost.
- f) The *leader* sees what everyone is doing, helping everyone fulfil their gifting.
- g) The *mercy* person is giving the person a hug, so they feel included instead of embarrassed.

It's the same event, but we all reacted differently. We're so much richer together than any one of us is on our own.

How do you know what your gifting is? It's what you do naturally, what brings you joy, where you find fulfilment. It's also the feedback you get from the community.

The reason I'm teaching is not only that I love doing so; it's that the feedback from the community over years is that this is what I do best.

What about you? What has helped you discover your giftings? And what has hindered you from using them?

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4.3 Doing right by each other (12:9-16)

Through faith in the Messiah, God sets us right with himself and with each other. So, out of faithfulness to him, we do right by God and by each other. But that's a process: we're still discovering how to present our bodies as living sacrifices to God each day. We're still renewing our minds, so as not to follow the pattern of the age that centres everything around me. We're still learning how to honour God by using the gifts he has given us to benefit everyone.

Because we're all still learning to live as the community of the Christ, there will be times when we're not treated right. What do we do then?

Romans 12:9-10 (NIV)

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves.

Sincere love doesn't pretend things are fine. Sincere love hates how evil seeks to control people, since serving Christ not like serving the old tyrant called Sin (6:11-14). We've learned to preserve ourselves through fight-or-flight responses, but sincere love doesn't react by trying to control the person (fight) or by rejecting the person as toxic (flight). Without pretending the evil is okay, love seeks for the good we have in common with the person so we can hold on to that.

Do you find that challenging? How do we do what verse 9 asks us to do in practice?

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Living in a family calls us to remain lovingly devoted to people who sometimes hurt us with their selfishness or uncaring ways. That's what *be devoted* (in verse 10) means:

philostorgoi ... expresses familial affection, an attachment sealed by nature and blood ties, uniting spouses, parents and children, brothers and sisters.⁸

Can you remain lovingly affectionate to people who may hurt us?

Can we honour them above ourselves (compare Philippians 2:4)?

Romans 12:11-13 (NIV)

¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

¹³ Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

How do we sustain this kind of loving community without running out of steam? What stops you from becoming cynical and withdrawing to save yourself from being hurt? What keeps your spirit on the boil? How do you keep the focus on who you're serving?

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Who are *the Lord's people in need* in your life? What can you do about it?

How do you decide which needs to respond to when there are so many?

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In our world, *hospitality* is an industry: pubs, clubs, cafés, hotels, B&Bs, etc.

How do we *practice hospitality*? What's the significance of eating together?

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⁸ Ceslas Spicq and James D. Ernest, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 3:462.

Romans 12:14 (NIV)

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

Persecute sounds like a religious word to us, but in Paul's language it meant simply to pursue, to hunt down. He just used this word to say, *Pursue hospitality*. (12:13). He used it previously to say *the nations did not pursue righteousness, but the people of Israel pursued the law as the path to righteousness but did not attain their goal* (9:30-31). Later he says, *Pursue peace* (14:19).

People may be hunting you down for many reasons. It could be religious (Acts 8:1-3), or scoundrels may be hunting you down to get some payment out of you even if they're not entitled to it. Justice is not always done.

So how do you respond if someone is pursuing you to take advantage of you? What might it mean to *bless* them rather than *cursing* them? How do you feel about that?

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At the heart of Paul's teaching is always what Jesus did. Sometimes Jesus withdrew when people were hunting him down (e.g. Matthew 2:22; 4:12; 12:14-15; 14:13). But ultimately he had come to face the trouble and oppression humanity had brought on itself by disregarding God as sovereign over the world. Instead of reacting to violence with violence, he shouldered it in his own body for our sake, to rescue us from the tyranny of Sin and Death.

That's the example we follow. That's the call to *offer your bodies as a living sacrifice* also (12:1), to break the mindset of climbing on top of others for personal advantage, replacing it with the mindset of loving and serving people just as Jesus fulfilled God's will by loving and serving us (12:2). That's the *sincere love* that hates how evil crushes people, but never lets go of the good work God is doing by restoring us in Christ (12:9).

So just as Jesus came to shoulder our joys and our pains to make peace, that's how we live under his leadership:

Romans 12:15-16 (NIV)

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Your thoughts?

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4.4 Doing right by those who do wrong (12:17-21)

Instead of giving us what we deserved when the world killed his Son, God remained faithful to his earthly realm, doing right and calling us to give our loyalty (faith) to him. The community under Jesus' leadership is therefore called to stop doing harm to each other. We're to treat each other the way God treated us in Christ, and leave justice for God to sort out:

Romans 12:17-21 (NIV)

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. [Deuteronomy 32:35]

²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

[Proverbs 25:21-22]

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

This text challenges my understanding of how justice should be implemented. Our goals are different to God's: we want people to get what they deserve, where God wants people to be restored to him.

The contrast between God's concept of justice and ours begins in Genesis 4. When Cain murdered Abel, the family thought Cain should die for his crime. God blocked their idea of justice: *The LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him* (Genesis 4:15). Cain went out from the presence of the LORD, founding a city where people enforce their own justice (4:23-24). In worshipping warriors, our humanness is corrupted, and everything is destroyed (6:4-13).

After the flood, violence was the one theme God confronted. He permitted killing animals, but insisted we give him an account for every human life. God authorized the community to take a killer's life (Genesis 9:1-6). This is a concession, to limit violence. It's not what God himself did in the beginning. The nations then misuse this God-given authority to take lives, introducing war as the means to build their kingdoms (10:8-12). In the world Paul wrote to, Rome was the ultimate war machine.

So that was the nature of nations when the LORD established Israel through the Sinai covenant. God had authorized the nations to take a life for a life, so that's what he did for Israel also. Retribution is foundational to justice throughout the Torah:

Exodus 21:23-25; Leviticus 24:18-20; Deuteronomy 19:21 (NIV)

Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Consequently, this view of justice pervades the Old Testament. Prophets declare that God would give Jerusalem and the nations what they deserve (e.g. Jeremiah 21:13; 51:6). Psalms call down violent retribution (e.g. 137:8-9). Wisdom books see God giving retribution (Proverbs 22:23). But the Wisdom books also acknowledge that life doesn't

always work like this (Job; Ecclesiastes 8:14). The Psalms hint at God *stilling the avenger* (8:2). And the Prophets speak of another covenant when God reforms relationship with this people by renewing their minds and transforming their hearts (Jeremiah 31:33).

So, what's the same and what's different in the new covenant in Christ?

Jesus did not come to scrap the Torah, but to fulfil it for his people (Matthew 5:17-20). He interpreted the Torah's prohibition of murder as God calling us to love people rather than seeking justice through human means (5:21-26). He interpreted the Torah's prohibition of adultery as a call to faithfulness to each other in deeds and words (5:27-37). Then Jesus challenged the basis of justice in the Torah:

Matthew 5:38-40 (NIV)

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, '*Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.*'

³⁹ "But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well."

Jesus just challenged the entire basis of justice in the Torah's legal system. It's hard to overestimate how radical this was for Jesus' audience on the mountainside, and how radical this is for us today.

Although God authorized Israel to use retribution as the basis of justice in their nation—as he had done for the nations before them—this was never God's view of justice. It's not how justice is to function in the kingdom of God under the Messiah's leadership.

The King orders his people not to give evil people what we think they deserve. Specifically, do not return violence with violence. And if the legal systems of this world sue you to take the shirt off your back, give them the coat that will leave you vulnerable to the cold and threaten your very survival rather than give them what you think they deserve.

Jesus anchors this view of justice in what God does, how God treats people:

Matthew 5:44-48 (paraphrased)

⁴⁴ "I'm telling you to love your enemies, and respond by praying when they hunt you down. ⁴⁵ Then you'll be children with your Father's view of justice—the Father who makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and who sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

⁴⁶ "If you only love those who love you, what reward do you expect? Even the Mafia treat their family that way! ... ⁴⁸ I'm calling you to love completely, the way your heavenly Father does."

The human view of justice is based on carrots and sticks (rewards and punishment) to get people to do right and not to do wrong. God's view of justice is to set right everything that been wrong, restoring all the broken pieces in the Messiah. That's *the mercies of God* Paul spoke of in verse 1. God's goal is not counting people's failures so as to give them retribution; God's goal is to redeem creation from enslavement to Sin and Death, undoing the mess we were born into by faith (i.e. calling us to faith[fulness] to the Messiah). It's in him that God restores justice to the earth.

And that's exactly how Paul expects justice to work in the community of the Messiah: not retribution (evil-for-evil) but a community doing good to baddies:

Romans 12:17 (NIV)

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

Retribution is a cycle: you hurt me, so I hurt you, so you hurt me, so ... As Ghandi put it, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" ends up with everyone blind and toothless.

The real challenge is to respond like this when others don't. God doesn't hold you responsible for the other person's actions or reactions:

Romans 12:18 (NIV)

¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

That's so freeing! God doesn't force them to do right, so don't take that on yourself to try to make them behave right either. Trust God's peace-making process, and leave enforcing justice to God:

Romans 12:19-20 (NIV)

¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends,
but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written:

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. [Deuteronomy 32:35]

²⁰ On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." [Proverbs 25:21-22]

It's not clear how blessing an enemy with hospitality could be *heaping burning coals on their head*. Perhaps our very generosity presses the issue of whether there's any genuineness in them (as in 1 Corinthians 3:15), or it may bring them to shame.

Either way, the issue of rewards and punishments belongs to God alone. We have no business in giving people what we think they deserve. We're agents of God's grace, not agents of retribution.

Instead, we're overturning evil by reacting with the opposite spirit:

Romans 12:21 (NIV)

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

Your thoughts? How practical is it to live like this? Will this vision of justice work? Will it change the world?

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4.5 So What?

Could Mechelle Turvey serve an example of living this sense of justice rather than revenge in Western Australia? See: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-06-28/cassius-turvey-murder-sentencing-mechelle-turvey-analysis/105469684>

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Many justice warriors use the kingdom of God as the basis for calling the rulers of this world to change their stance, to give justice to the poor and oppressed. Is that what we're called to do? Are we—like the prophets of the Old Testament—called to speak truth to power, demanding the present rulers to give us justice? Or does the kingdom of God in Christ call us to embody a different kind of justice, one that's not based on people getting what they deserve? How does the application of the gospel in Romans 12–16 shape what we're called to do as the people who live under Jesus' reign?

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There are many ways to describe how Christ made atonement between God and humans, heaven and earth. But we may need to rethink any theories of atonement that rely on human views of retribution. We think, "someone had to pay" or "someone had to die" but does these phrases represent how God thinks about justice? Do some of our ideas about atonement need to be replaced with views that accord with God's view of justice and his restoration of the world?

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For next week, read Romans 13–14.