

## Living Authentically (Revised)

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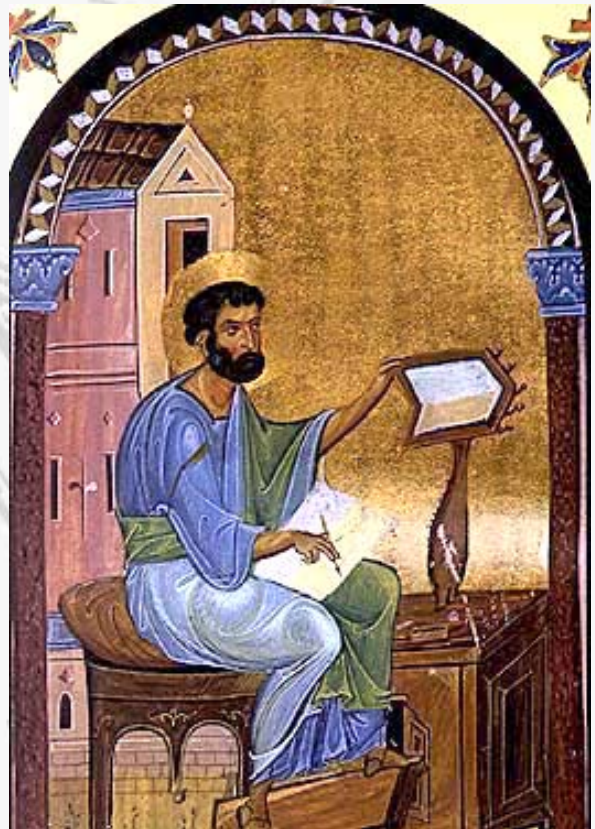
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***This study is an undated revision of [an earlier study](#) on the same passage. Parts of it have been rewritten and expanded; other parts remain the same.***

***In Romans 12 the apostle Paul turned a corner in the writing of this letter. Through the first eleven chapters he focused on doctrinal themes centered around sinful humanity attaining righteous standing before God, as 1:16-17 indicated. But with 12:1-2, the focus shifts to living out that new spiritual relationship on a day to day basis. What follows is a series of admonitions to living the sacrificed life admonished in 12:1-2. Verses 9-21 constitute the second stream of emphasis out of nine that continue down through 15:13.***

***The admonitions in 12:9-21 challenge believers to love genuinely and positively with other people, especially non-believers who are hostile. In some ways these admonitions represent Paul's elaboration of Jesus' teaching on loving one's enemies as set forth in the Sermon on the Mount. These teachings of Jesus were circulated orally for decades before Matthew put them in written form in the late 60s to early 70s, over a decade after Paul had dictated his letter to the Romans to Tertius for writing in the mid 50s.***

***In a world running over with shallow, hypocritical expressions of love and increasingly violent prone hatred, we need to hear this message of the apostle. First century Christians knew all too well both these patterns that we experience today. Perhaps they experienced both hypocrisy and hatred more than we. That links us to them in the need to learn from Paul. In learning how to love genuinely and positively we regain the powerful witness of our faith to a lost world. We discover richer, deeper joys in living. God's blessings can flow in abundant measure upon us.***





## I. Context

Since this study is a revision of a [previous one](#), the material used there will be used here, but with some updating and revision.

### a. Historical

#### External History.

The compositional history of Romans is one of the easier ones in the New Testament. The letter was dictated to a Tertius, who did the actual writing of the letter as Rom. 16:22 indicates: “I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord” (NRSV). The use of a writing secretary, an [amanuensis](#), for the composition of more formal documents was commonplace in the ancient world, and most likely, all of Paul’s letters were written this way. He is mentioned only here in the New Testament. Thus we know virtually nothing about him beyond this one point.

The document was written while Paul was in Corinth ([Acts 20:2b-3a](#)) toward the end of the third missionary journey (see [Acts 18:23-21:16](#)) and was planning to come to Rome after returning back to Jerusalem and Antioch, as he indicates in chapter fifteen of this letter (NRSV):

“22 This is the reason that I have so often been hindered from coming to you. 23 But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you 24 when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. 25 At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; 26 for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. 27 They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. 28 So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain; 29 and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

30 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, 31 that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and



that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, 32 so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. 33 The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.”

Paul had been collecting a massive offering from the Gentile Christians that he was taking back to Jerusalem to help relieve the Jewish Christians who were suffering from famine and persecution at that time. [2 Corinthians 8-9](#) has an extensive discussion of this relief offering, as well as [1 Cor. 16:1-4](#). His hope was that this would help build bridges of understanding and fellowship between Jew and Gentile inside the Christian communities of faith. This was still a period of tension, and all over the Mediterranean world Jewish fanatical nationalistic pride was exploding against non-Jews, especially in Palestine itself. The [Zealot revolt against Rome](#) was foaming in the northern Palestinian province of Galilee, and would engulf the entire eastern Mediterranean world by [the middle 60s](#). Christian communities, which had increasingly become mixtures of Jews and Gentiles, were feeling the brunt of this tension, especially those in Palestine.

In reality, this trip to Jerusalem was risky and would forever alter Paul’s life and plans. His intent, while writing to the Roman Christians from Corinth, was to visit them and solicit their support as a base



of operations for evangelizing the western Mediterranean world, much as Antioch had been in the efforts in the eastern Mediterranean world through the three missionary journeys described in Acts. So far as we know, Paul was never able to realize this plan. Once in Jerusalem he was arrested and would spend the next several years as a prisoner of the Roman government, first in Caesarea ([Acts 24:1-26:32](#)) and then in Rome itself ([Acts 28:16-31](#)). Whether or not Paul ever traveled in the western Mediterranean is uncertain. Some ancient church traditions suggest that he did, but this cannot be confirmed by solid information. Very likely he managed to gain his

freedom after an appearance before the Roman emperor in the early 60s, then resume ministry largely confined to the central Mediterranean Sea area when 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus were written. By the middle 60s he was arrested again and suffered martyrdom at the hands of Nero in Rome.

**Internal History.** Because Rom. 12:9-21 is didactic (teaching) in nature, rather than narrative (event description), it contains few space and time markers, making an internal history insignificant to the interpretation of the passage. Thus we will not devote attention to this aspect.

## b. Literary

**Genre.** The literary form of our passage begins with recognition that it comes from an ancient letter. This particular letter is more formal than the majority of those connected with the apostle Paul. This is due in part to it being a “letter of introduction” to a congregation where Paul had not previously visited. But, as chapter 15:14-33 makes clear, Paul hoped to visit Rome and to draw upon their support for missionary activity in the western Mediterranean region as far as Spain. Thus he introduces himself, his ministry, and his theology in an eloquent way to this congregation. The pattern of ancient letters is illustrated by the diagram to the right.

Our passage is shaped in the pattern of ancient paraenesis, or moral admonition.<sup>1</sup> This passage doesn’t fit any established sub-form, but does fall in the general category of moral admonition.

**Literary Context.** The literary context of 12:9-21 is an important aspect of correct interpretation. As the study of 12:1-2 demonstrated, the first two verses of chapter twelve play a foundational role in the moral admonition segments found from

Paul's Letter to the Philippians	
Praescriptio	
Superscriptio	Παῦλος καὶ Τιμόθεος δοῦλοι Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ
Adscriptio	πᾶσιν τοῖς ἁγίοις ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ τοῖς οὖσιν ἐν Φιλίπποις σὺν ἐπισκόποις καὶ διακόνοις,
Salutatio	χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.
Proem	Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου ἐπὶ πάσῃ τῇ μνεΐᾳ ὑμῶν. . .
Body	Γινώσκεις δὲ ὑμᾶς βούλομαι, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι τὰ κατ' ἐμὲ μᾶλλον εἰς προκοπὴν τοῦ εὐαγγελίου ἐλήλυθεν, ὥστε τοὺς δεσμούς μου φανεροὺς ἐν Χριστῷ γενέσθαι ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ πραιτωρίῳ καὶ τοῖς λοιποῖς πάσιν, . . .
Conclusio	Ἀσπάσασθε πάντα ἅγιον ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. ἀσπάζονται ὑμᾶς οἱ σὺν ἐμοὶ ἀδελφοί. . .

## Ancient Letter on papyrus

12:3 through 15:13. In the [body](#) (1:16-15:13) of the Letter to the Romans, we find a clearly defined shift of thought in 12:1-2. Through the end of chapter eleven, the material focuses on the central theme of the righteousness of God (ἡ δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ; see [1:16-17](#) for the initial expression) and its various implications for Christian belief. At the beginning of chapter twelve the subject shifts from the emphasis on the theological concept of God’s righteousness to how that impacts the believer’s daily living. From

<sup>1</sup>For a more detailed information, see Dr. Roger Maddix’s [treatment](#) in a PhD research paper composed for a seminar group that I was leading.

of the Second Coming, 13:11-14; (6) Not Judging your Brother, 14:1-12; (7) Not Causing your Brother to Stumble, 14:13-23; (8) Pleasing Others rather than Self, 15:1-13. Thus our passage is the second set of admonitions developed off this foundational concept in 12:1-2.



## Ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1) ἀποστυγοῦντες τὸ πονηρόν,               | - |
| κολλώμενοι τῷ ἀγαθῷ,                       | + |
| 2) τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι, | + |
| τῇ τιμῇ ἀλλήλους προηγούμενοι,             | + |
| 3) τῇ σπουδῇ μὴ ὀκνηροί,                   | - |
| τῷ πνεύματι ζέοντες,                       | + |
| τῷ κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες,                      | + |
| 4) τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες,                    | + |
| τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες,                     | - |
| τῇ προσευχῇ προσκατεροῦντες,               | + |
| 5) ταῖς χρείαις τῶν ἀγίων κοινωνοῦντες,    | + |
| τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες.                  | + |

rather than artificial or pretense. The New Living Translation captures this idea perhaps better with its translation, “Don’t just pretend that you love others.” The one place where people need to be genuine in their relationships is inside the community of faith. There’s no room for pretence or phoniness inside the church! The idea of love here is the ancient Greek agape love. This love isn’t ‘warm fuzzy feelings for others.’ Rather, it’s the sacrificial commitment for the benefit of others that God demonstrated in Christ, which John 3:16 describes.

What does this kind of love imply in our relationships with others? Following this core admonition, Paul laid out a series of twelve admonitions that illustrate sacrificial, genuine love (12:9b-13). When we implement this love toward others, these are some of the concrete actions that we will do. In this ancient [‘virtue list’](#), several of these are closely connected to one another, sometimes as a positive/negative set etc. We will briefly take a look at them:

### (1) “hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good”

(v. 9, NRSV; ἀποστυγοῦντες τὸ πονηρόν, κολλώμενοι τῷ ἀγαθῷ). Genuine love positions us on the side of what God defines as good. It also positions us in opposition to what is wrong and harmful, especially to others. Thus the first thing coming out of genuine love is a commitment to do what will help others, rather than anything that will harm them. Here the negative/positive couplet surfaces.

(2) “love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor” (v. 10, NRSV, τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι, τῇ τιμῇ ἀλλήλους προηγούμενοι). The beginning words in the Greek

text provide help here: (1) in regard to brotherly love [philadelphia]...; (2) in regard to honor [timé].... The common link of ‘one another’ is also present. Not only are we committed in genuine love to doing good, but here we are committed to being “devoted” to one another, to showing honor to one another. As Douglas Moo summarizes in the Romans volume of the *New International Greek Testament Commentary* series (pp. 777-778),

Paul is then calling on Christians to outdo each other in bestowing honor on one another; for example, to recognize and praise one another’s accomplishments and to defer to one another.

Here the pair of expressions follow a synonymous parallelism structure.

(3) “Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord” (v. 11, NRSV, τῇ σπουδῇ μὴ ὀκνηροί, τῷ πνεύματι ζέοντες, τῷ κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες). These three admonitions hang together, although the first one could easily be connected to the pair in verse ten (2 above). Taken together they form a step parallelism expression leading to the climatic third admonition, “serve the Lord.” The negative emphasis is first: our zeal in serving God must never be allowed to slip. Paul’s words literally mean, “in earnestness not lazy people.” The positive contrasting statement follows: “in your spirit being set on fire.” The image is of enthusiasm. The channel through which this excitement flows: “serving the Lord.” Sacrificial commitment (12:1-2) means excited, animated service to God; not dull, uninterested obligatory service. This is the cure for religious legalism. It was one of the differences that Paul discovered about religion after meeting the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus. This excitement must be an expression of genuine love. As a professor at Southwestern Seminary used to tell students in the 1920s, “Boys, let the cup overflow naturally when God fills it. You don’t have to shake it in order to make it overflow!”

(4) “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer” (v. 12, NRSV; τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες, τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες, τῇ προσευχῇ προσκατεροῦντες). Rejoicing, being consistent, being persistent -- these three admonitions are linked to hope, affliction and prayer. Collectively they allude to the hard times that come to us



as believers and to us as communities of faith. In those moments we reach beyond the dark clouds surrounding us to the bright ray of confidence in the future blessing of God. This means we find the resources to 'hang in there' in hardship without faltering or giving up. The key to the needed resources: God's strength gained through persistent prayer. When this takes place inside the community of faith as an expression of genuine love, no hardship can overwhelm us.

**(5) "Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers"** (v. 13, NRSV; ταῖς χρεΐαις τῶν ἀγίων κοινωνοῦντε, τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες). This genuine love for others will take on the concrete expression of ministry to the needs, here including and stressing physical needs, of others inside the community of believers. In Acts where the word for 'needs' [χρεΐαις] shows up, the stress is upon the willingness of believers to sell whatever property they had in order to take care of the physical needs of others. Cf. Acts 2:44-45, **"44 All who believed were**

**together and had all things in common; 45 they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need"** (NRSV).

But believers were to also reach out to fellow Christians who were passing through their city. Showing hospitality to strangers is a significant emphasis in the New Testament as in 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9. Christian travelers, especially itinerant missionaries, in the ancient world had no safe place to stay in their journeys, apart from the homes of fellow Christians. The inns that were available were little more than brothels and not a place that Christians would want to stay in. Thus hospitality played a very important role in early Christianity. Paul here heightens the emphasis with the admonition to "pursue" strangers, that is, to go out of one's way to be hospitable.

Thus, as this first segment of 12:9-21 shows, we must demonstrate genuine love for others. And this love will naturally flow into the patterns of expression defined in verses 9b-13.

#### **b. Bless others, vv. 14-16a**

##### **The Greek NT**

12·14 εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς διώκοντας ὑμᾶς, εὐλογεῖτε καὶ μὴ καταρᾶσθε. 12·15 χαίρειν μετὰ χαιρόντων, κλαίειν μετὰ κλαιόντων. 12·16 τὸ αὐτὸ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονοῦντες, μὴ τὰ ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες ἀλλὰ τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι.

##### **NASB**

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.

##### **NRSV**

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly;

##### **NLT**

14 If people persecute you because you are a Christian, don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. 15 When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow. 16 Live in harmony with each other. Don't try to act important, but enjoy the company of ordinary people.

##### **Notes:**

This second segment continues the underlying theme of love but shifts the focus from inside the community of faith to those on the outside. A subtle play on words is present in the Greek text that isn't possible to preserve in English translation. In verse thirteen we are to pursue [διώκοντες] hospitality; in verse fourteen we are to bless those persecuting us [διώκοντας]. This provides a conceptual link between the two statements in an ironic play on word meaning. Paul was fond of doing this and repeats a similar play on the same verb in Phil. 3:6, 12. He once was the persecutor of Christians as an outsider. Now he admonishes Christians to bless (εὐλογεῖτε, *eulogeite*) the persecutors. In Hebraistic thought pattern the admonition is issued, then quickly repeated with its counterpart added (bless, bless and curse not). This achieved powerful emphasis upon the

admonition. Both verbs refer to prayer language. We are to pray for God's blessing rather than His curse upon those persecuting us.

These words echo the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Note both Matthew's and Luke's rendering of this important teaching:

**Mt. 5:43-45**, "43 'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and **pray for those who persecute you**, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven;..." (NRSV).

**Lu. 6:27-28**, "27 'But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 **bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you**'" (NRSV).



Thus in following both the teaching and the example that Jesus set, we reach out to our enemies in 'unnatural' ways. Sinful humanity reacts typically to opposition by striking back, usually with greater force in order to destroy the enemy. As Paul declared earlier in the 'theological' section, "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life" ([Rom. 5:10](#), NRSV). God loved us as enemies. As His children we can do no less toward our enemies.

This invoking of God's blessings on persecutors then takes on tangible expression in the following series of admonitions growing out of this core admonition (vv. 15-16), here expressed not as a regular verb but by a series of infinitives and participles in the original text. Two sets of admonitions surface.

**εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς διώκοντας ὑμᾶς,  
εὐλογεῖτε  
καὶ  
μὴ καταρᾶσθε.**

- |                                     |   |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1) χαίρειν μετὰ χαιρόντων,          | + |
| κλαίειν μετὰ κλαιόντων.             | - |
| 2) τὸ αὐτὸ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονοῦντες, | + |
| μὴ τὰ ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες              | - |
| ἀλλὰ                                |   |
| τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι.       | + |

**(1) "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep"** (v. 15, NRSV; χαίρειν μετὰ χαιρόντων, κλαίειν μετὰ κλαιόντων). The context here points toward our relationships with the outsiders and admonishes the expression of sympathy, that is, the ability to feel the same feelings as the other person. In moments of joy by others, we reach out to them in joy; in moments of sorrow we reach out with tears. Not only then are we praying for God to bless our enemies, but we reach out to them in the good and bad in their lives with genuine sharing of their emotions during those moments. What a powerful witness to the love of God at work in us! It won't be long before those enemies become brothers in this situation.

Christian ministry activities such as disaster relief, feeding



the hungry, giving shelter to the homeless etc. have their origin in the biblical admonition here. The ability to compassionately reach out is indeed a Christian witness that God can use powerfully to touch the hearts of sinful humans. Certainly this represents the sort of thing to be evaluated in final judgment according to [Matt. 25:31-46](#).<sup>2</sup>

**(2) "Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly"** (v. 16a, NRSV; τὸ αὐτὸ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονοῦντες, μὴ τὰ ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες ἀλλὰ τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι). Again contextually the thrust is toward outsiders, although not excluding those inside the community of faith. James D.G. Dunn (*Word Biblical Commentary*, Logos Systems) observes:

This is first of a sequence of exhortations where Paul draws on the maxims of traditional Jewish wisdom (see *Form and Structure*). Here the closest parallel is Sir 7:34; μὴ ὑστέρει ἀπὸ κλαιόντων, καὶ μετὰ πενθούντων πένθησον, "Do not fail those who weep, but mourn with those who mourn." See also Job 30:25 LXX; Philo, Jos. 94; T. Iss. 7.5; T. Zeb 6.5; 7.3-4; T. Jos. 17.7. For later rabbinic parallels see Str-B, 3:298. As with the echo of Jesus' teaching in v 14, it is the sentiment which is traditional rather than a particular form of words. And as so often with wisdom material, it is not particularly distinctive of Jewish and Christian thought. Here cf. particularly Epictetus 2.5.23: "Where a man may rejoice with good reason, there others may rejoice with him" (see also Michel, n.27). The parallel with 1 Cor 12:26 and Phil 2:17-18 suggests that Paul had the internal relationships of the Christian congregations particularly in view, but there is no reason he should not have had wider associations in view as well (TDNT 9:369 n.93; Furnish, *Love Command*, 106; Cranfield; Wilckens). There was certainly some ambivalence within earliest Christianity on the degree

<sup>2</sup>34b "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; 35 for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, 36 I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."

to which Jesus encouraged his disciples to feel a sense of solidarity with the poor and oppressed; cf. particularly Matthew's handling of the first beatitude (Matt 5:3// Luke 6:20) and of the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matt 25:31-46). But Paul's other counsel on social relationships suggests an openness to the nonbeliever which would encourage a broader application of his words here (cf. 1 Cor 10:27; 14:23-25). Such genuine empathy (feeling with; cf. particularly Gaugler) with those benefiting or suffering from the ups and downs of daily existence would be seen as distinct from the Stoic ideal of ἀταραξία, "impassiveness" (Käsemann). For χαίρειν, see also on 12:12. Paul uses κλαίω elsewhere only in 1 Cor 7:30 and Phil 3:18. For the contrast with eschatological overtones, cf. John 16:20 and <sup>3</sup>Herm. Vis. 3.3.2; also Luke 6:21, 25.

Spiritual elitism has no place inside the community of faith, either in attitudes toward each other, or toward non-Christians. When we ask God to bless others, we can't then turn toward them with a 'holy Joeism' that considers them somehow inferior to us. Christianity has often been crippled in its efforts to win others to faith in Christ because it failed to heed what Paul is talking about here. The non-believing world often looks down on Christians as inferior people who have sought refuge in religion to escape their problems and failures. But believers have no justification of reciprocating this elitist attitude by considering the non-believing world as spiritual morons who deserve eternal damnation. Genuine love precludes such attitudes.

<sup>3</sup>Herm. Vis. Hermas, Mandates Similitudes Visions

### c. Have the right attitude, vv. 16b-20

#### The Greek NT

μὴ γίνεσθε φρόνιμοι παρ' ἑαυτοῖς. 12·17 μηδενὶ κακὸν ἀντὶ κακοῦ ἀποδιδόντες, προνοοῦμενοι καλὰ ἐνώπιον πάντων ἀνθρώπων· 12·18 εἰ δυνατόν τὸ ἐξ ὑμῶν, μετὰ πάντων ἀνθρώπων εἰρηνεύοντες· 12·19 μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, ἀγαπητοί, ἀλλὰ δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ, γέγραπται γάρ, Ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω, λέγει κύριος. 12·20 ἀλλὰ ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρὸς σου, ψάμμιζε αὐτόν· ἐὰν διψᾷ, πότιζε αὐτόν· τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ.

#### NASB

Do not be wise in your own estimation. 17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. 20 "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."

#### NRSV

Do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."

#### NLT

And don't think you know it all! 17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. 18 Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible. 19 Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God. For it is written, "I will take vengeance; I will repay those who deserve it," says the Lord. 20 Instead, do what the Scriptures say: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink, and they will be ashamed of what they have done to you."

#### Notes:

This third section is introduced by a regular verb based admonition: "Do not claim to be wiser than you are" (NRSV; μὴ γίνεσθε φρόνιμοι παρ' ἑαυτοῖς.).<sup>4</sup> The theme of spiritual elitism is continued from the preceding segment by this expression, but the thrust turns inward. We must not form a bloated opinion of ourselves, especially in regard to our spirituality. The New Living Translation captures the essence of the admonition quite well: "And don't think you know it all!" Literally the expression is along the lines of "don't become wise in your own eyes." The point contextually here seems to be that we need a healthy self image before we will be able to reach out to others properly and in God's ways. In order to

<sup>4</sup>Compare Rom. 11:25 for a similar emphasis (NRSV): "So that you may not claim to be wiser than you are, brothers and sisters, I want you to understand this mystery: a hardening has come upon part of Israel, until the full number of the Gentiles has come in."



**μὴ γίνεσθε φρόνιμοι παρ' ἑαυτοῖς:**

- 1 μηδενὶ κακὸν ἀντὶ κακοῦ ἀποδιδόντες,
- 2 προνοούμενοι καλὰ ἐνώπιον πάντων ἀνθρώπων·
- 3 εἰ δυνατόν τὸ ἐξ ὑμῶν, μετὰ πάντων ἀνθρώπων εἰρηνεύοντες·
- 4 μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικούντες, ἀγαπητοί,
- 5 ἀλλὰ δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ,
- 6 γέγραπται γάρ, Ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω, λέγει κύριος.
- 7 ἀλλὰ ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρὸς σου, ψώμιζε αὐτόν· ἐὰν διψᾷ, πότιζε αὐτόν·
- 8 τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ.

live in a sinful world and relate to other people properly, the believer must have “his head screwed on properly.” With a distorted perspective of who we are, we will be very inclined to reach out to “those poor pagans” with a phoney piety. Or, as the following admonitions growing out of this ‘header’ admonition suggest, we will sink down to their degenerate level in a tit-for-tat ism.

Whether Paul is directly reflecting a teaching of Jesus circulated orally at this point in time is not absolutely certain. But such seems to be the case, since the Old Testament principle of cursing one’s enemies is contradicted by this principle. And nothing in ancient Greek or Roman philosophical tradition even remotely resembles the concepts laid down by both Jesus and Paul. A bloated ego falsely assuming superior spiritual knowledge and thus driven by human reasoning rather than by God would easily miss the points made in the elaboration of the header admonition. What Paul sets forth is distinctly Christian perspective not found elsewhere.

Jesus rejected the “eye for an eye” principle in the Old Testament: “38 You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.” (NRSV, [Matt. 5:38-42](#))

Paul moves the same direction: “17b Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. 18 Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible. 19 Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God.” (NLT, 16b-19) The five admonitions here

underscore the importance of reaching out to others in constructive, relationship building ways if at all possible. These admonitions, especially the last two, are buttressed by Paul’s citing to two Old Testament passages. They follow a chiasmic sequence of expression (AB//B’A):

**A** Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (vv. 17-18)

**B** Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God (v. 19a)

**B’** “I will take vengeance; I will repay those who deserve it,” says the Lord. (v. 19b, from [Deut. 32:35](#))

**A’** “If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink, and they will be ashamed of what they have done to you.” (v. 20, from [Prov. 25:21-22](#))

This kind of thought structure is very common in both the Old and New Testaments. Thus the Deut. 32 quote reinforces the second set of admonitions, and the Prov. 25 quote supports the first set of admonitions.

How Paul made use of OT texts is well charted by James Dunn (WBC) in the use of Deut. 32:35

The following quotation is from Deut 32:35:

Paul = Heb	ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις
10:30	ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω
<sup>1</sup> MT	לִי סָקָן וְשָׁלַם (“vengeance is mine and recompense”)
LXX	ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ἐκδίκησεως ἀνταποδώσω
Tg. Neof. =	Vengeance is mine, and I am he who
Frg. Tg.	will repay
<sup>4</sup> Tg. Onq. =	Punishment is before me, and I even
<sup>5</sup> Tg. Ps.-J.	I will repay (Str-B, 3:300).

Since the text of Paul and Heb agrees in part with the MT and in part with the LXX and is closest to the Targums, we should assume that a different text from the LXX was current among the diaspora churches. By speaking of “the day of judgment” the LXX seems to refer to the last judgment (cf. Jer 46 [LXX 26]:10; Philo, <sup>5</sup>Leg. All. 3.106; Luke 21:22); but the Hebrew is not so specific in content or context, and elsewhere in the OT the thought of divine retribution is not regularly eschatological. Paul’s departure from the LXX at this point leaves open the issue of whether he referred the text to the last judgment (see on ὀργή above). For ἐκδίκησις cf. particularly Isa 59:17-18; for ἀνταποδίδωμι cf. Rom 11:9 and 2 Thess 1:6. Since he is echoing prophetic language (see first paragraph above) Paul in effect treats λέγει κύριος as part of the

<sup>5</sup>Leg. All. Philo, *De Legum Allegoriarum*

quotation and therefore κύριος as referring to Yahweh (Ortkemper, 111–12; cf. 14:11; 1 Cor 14:21; 2 Cor 6:17–18); see further Ellis, *Paul's Use*, 107–112. (Footnotes for table)  
 MT The Masoretic Text [of the Old Testament] (as published in BHS)

*Tg. Neof. Targum Neofiti I*

*Frg. Tg. Fragmentary Targum*

*Tg. Onq. Targum Onqelos*

*Tg. Ps.-J. Targum Pseudo-Jonathan*

Most of the time New Testament writers do not worry about precise word-for-word citation of texts from the Old Testament. The demand for such precision is a western cultural development from the Enlightenment forward, and is particularly an American obsession, in large part due to U.S. copyright laws and concepts of property ownership. Consequently, we do the writers of the New Testament a huge injustice when we impose down upon them demands for contemporary U.S. standards of citation of existing materials. The ancient world was idea focused rather than word focused.

The point of these verses for us today is that when Christians with a proper understanding of who they are before God reach out in constructive ways to others, especially those who are hostile, they are following in the ancient tradition God established with His covenant people Israel. And even going beyond that tradition in following the new standard set by Jesus himself.

In a nutshell, we need our heads screwed on right if we are to positively minister to people around us. Bloated egos and self-inflated views of ourselves stand as horrific barriers to constructive relationships with others, especially those outside the Christian community.



#### d. Be victorious, v. 21

##### Greek NT

<sup>12:21</sup> μὴ νικῶ ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ ἀλλὰ νίκα ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν.

##### NASB

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

##### NRSV

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

##### NLT

21 Don't let evil get the best of you, but conquer evil by doing good.

#### Notes:

This climatic set of negative/positive admonitions returns to the ideas of evil and good. Evil is a powerful presence in our sinful, hostile world and would defeat the community of faith in a heartbeat if allowed to. But it has no claim to victory over us. It achieves victory only if we allow it domination. In contrast, we are admonished to use the good, i.e., what God has defined as right, as the instrument to gain victory over Evil. To the non-Christian, and maybe at times even to us believers, evil seems to be the superior force. Love and doing good are often denigrated as expressions of weakness. But in reality the Good is far more powerful than Evil. Evil tears down and destroys; Good builds up and restores. Evil guts a person's life into an empty, meaningless shell; Good takes the rotten sinner and makes him/her a child of God. In the end, Good will triumph over Evil when our Lord returns to claim his bride for eternity.

Thus presenting ourselves as living sacrifices to God (12:1-2) means that we live in a community of

genuine love and engage in actions that build up the community and help that community present the face of God and His grace to the outside non-believing world. As Jesus put it, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:16, NRSV).





**Greek NT**

<sup>12-9</sup> Ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος. ἀποστύγοντες τὸ πονηρόν, κολλώμενοι τῷ ἀγαθῷ, <sup>12-10</sup> τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι, τῇ τιμῇ ἀλλήλους προηγούμενοι, <sup>12-11</sup> τῇ σπουδῇ μὴ ὀκνηροί, τῷ πνεύματι ζέοντες, τῷ κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες, <sup>12-12</sup> τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες, τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες, τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτεροῦντες, <sup>12-13</sup> ταῖς χρείαις τῶν ἀγίων κοινωνοῦντες, τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες. <sup>12-14</sup> εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς διώκοντας ὑμᾶς, εὐλογεῖτε καὶ μὴ καταρᾶσθε. <sup>12-15</sup> χαίρειν μετὰ χαιρόντων, κλαίειν μετὰ κλαιόντων. <sup>12-16</sup> τὸ αὐτὸ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονοῦντες, μὴ τὰ ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες ἀλλὰ τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι. μὴ γίνεσθε φρόνιμοι παρ' ἑαυτοῖς. <sup>12-17</sup> μηδενὶ κακὸν ἀντὶ κακοῦ ἀποδιδόντες, προνοοῦμενοι καλὰ ἐνώπιον πάντων ἀνθρώπων. <sup>12-18</sup> εἰ δυνατόν τὸ ἐξ ὑμῶν, μετὰ πάντων ἀνθρώπων εἰρηνεύοντες. <sup>12-19</sup> μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες, ἀγαπητοί, ἀλλὰ δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ, γέγραπται γάρ, Ἐμοὶ ἐκδίκησις, ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω, λέγει κύριος. <sup>12-20</sup> ἀλλὰ ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρὸς σου, ψάμιζε αὐτόν· ἐὰν διψᾷ, πότιζε αὐτόν· τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ. <sup>12-21</sup> μὴ νικᾷ ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ ἀλλὰ νίκα ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν.

**NASB**

9 Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; 11 not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; 12 rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, 13 contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. 17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. 20 "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**NRSV**

9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; 10 love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; Do not claim to be wiser than you are. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. 18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

**NLT**

9 Don't just pretend that you love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Stand on the side of the good. 10 Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. 11 Never be lazy in your work, but serve the Lord enthusiastically. 12 Be glad for all God is planning for you. Be patient in trouble, and always be prayerful. 13 When God's children are in need, be the one to help them out. And get into the habit of inviting guests home for dinner or, if they need lodging, for the night. 14 If people persecute you because you are a Christian, don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. 15 When others are happy, be happy with them. If they are sad, share their sorrow. 16 Live in harmony with each other. Don't try to act important, but enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! 17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. 18 Do your part to live in peace with everyone, as much as possible. 19 Dear friends, never avenge yourselves. Leave that to God. For it is written, "I will take vengeance; I will repay those who deserve it," says the Lord. 20 Instead, do what the Scriptures say: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink, and they will be ashamed of what they have done to you." 21 Don't let evil get the best of you, but conquer evil by doing good.

## Block Diagram

- (1) 12·9 Ἡ ἀγάπη (ἔστω) ἀνυπόκριτος.  
ἀποστυγοῦντες τὸ πονηρόν,  
12·10 κολλώμενοι τῷ ἀγαθῷ,  
τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι,  
12·11 τῇ τιμῇ ἀλλήλους προηγούμενοι,  
τῇ σπουδῇ μὴ ὀκνηροί,  
τῷ πνεύματι ζέοντες,  
12·12 τῷ κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες,  
τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες,  
τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες,  
12·13 τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτεροῦντες,  
ταῖς χρεΐαις τῶν ἁγίων κοινωνοῦντες,  
τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες.
- (2) 12·14 εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς διώκοντας ὑμᾶς,  
(3) εὐλογεῖτε  
καὶ  
(4) μὴ καταρᾶσθε.  
12·15 χαίρειν μετὰ χαιρόντων,  
κλαίειν μετὰ κλαιόντων.  
12·16 τὸ αὐτὸ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονοῦντες,  
μὴ τὰ ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες  
ἀλλὰ  
τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι.
- (5) μὴ γίνεσθε φρόνιμοι  
παρ' ἑαυτοῖς.  
12·17 μηδενὶ κακὸν ἀντὶ κακοῦ ἀποδιδόντες,  
προνοοῦμενοι καλὰ ἐνώπιον πάντων ἀνθρώπων·  
12·18 εἰ δυνατόν τὸ ἐξ ὑμῶν,  
μετὰ πάντων ἀνθρώπων εἰρηνεύοντες·  
12·19 μὴ ἑαυτοὺς ἐκδικοῦντες,  
ἀγαπητοί,  
ἀλλὰ  
(6) δότε τόπον τῇ ὀργῇ,  
γὰρ  
(7) γέγραπται,  
Ἔμοι ἐκδίκησις,  
ἐγὼ ἀνταποδώσω,  
λέγει κύριος.  
12·20 ἀλλὰ  
ἐὰν πεινᾷ ὁ ἐχθρὸς σου,  
ψάμιζε αὐτόν·  
ἐὰν διψᾷ,  
πότιζε αὐτόν·  
γὰρ  
τοῦτο ποιῶν  
ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σφραῖνεις  
ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ.
- (8) 12·21 μὴ νικῶ  
ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ  
ἀλλὰ  
(9) νίκα... τὸ κακόν.  
ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ



## Semantic Diagram of 12:9-21

I. Love genuinely	-----	(1)	Show genuine love
		(2)	Bless your enemies
II. Bless people	-----	(3)	Bless
			and
		(4)	Don't curse them.
		(5)	Stop being a holy Joe
			instead
III. Proper attitude	-----	(6)	Give proper place to anger
			for
		(7)	This has a scripture basis
IV. Be victorious	-----	(8)	Don't be defeated by evil
			but
		(9)	Be victorious with good

### Summary of Rhetorical Structure

This provides the basis for the outline in the Bible study, since it comes from within the internal thought structure of Rom. 12:9-21, rather than being superimposed down on to the scripture. The above numbers in (-) reflect the core declarations found in the block diagram on the preceding page.

In studying the block diagram on the preceding page, you will notice a lot of Greek text in *italicized blue*, with numbers in the beginning left margin. These represent the core statements (main clauses, grammatically) in this passage. Underneath these core statements you will notice many modifying elements. Paul utilized some capabilities of Koine Greek that our English language has no ability to copy. Through the use of a whole series of independent imperatival usage of Greek participles and infinitives, he expanded the core ideas with numerous secondary admonitions. By this combination of regular verbs and then verbal forms he built a very clear core structure with regular verbs and then fleshed out this skeleton with the verbal expressions. Unfortunately, the grammatical limitations of our English language make reproducing this structure in a coherent English expression utterly impossible.

But understanding this structure enables the Bible student to see very clearly the inner relationship among all the admonitions contained in this passage. Hopefully, the study provided in this lesson will throw some helpful light on making sense of Rom. 12:9-21.