



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Transformed Society

Romans 12.9-21

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Introduction

Watch/read the news — international, national, local. Society needs to change. Add things you've experienced and the conclusion is the same. What do we expect? Since Genesis 3, things have been messed up. People — we — do wrong things. But, even knowing we are not perfect, history shows that things can be better. How? There are three ways.

1. Impose order from without. From ruling a home to ruling a nation, some have done this — for a while. But, absence of visible rebellion does not mean people *are* good.
2. Give tangible incentives for better behavior. This also has been done. But it works only as long as the incentive holds out¹ and can lead to manipulation, which can be reciprocated, making matters worse.
3. Change people one by one; develop integrity of character and purity of heart that does the right things for the right reasons.

The third way, harder in the short term, is best. So, in Romans Paul depicts the process of the transformation from slavery to sin (1.18-3.20) to acquittal and new life wherein one accepts by faith the grace that comes from the mercies of God (3.21-11.32). When grace is fully accepted, faith yields to his transforming work that leads ever farther from conformity to this age (12.1-3).

People so transformed defeated Roman imperialism by leavening, not force. Our text gives the blueprint: to transform society, we must be a transformed society.

Connections and Structures

At first read, our text strikes us as a loose connection of individual commands. But, the repetition of key words shows that Paul is developing a theme.²

1. Words for "love": ἀγάπη (*agapē*), φιλαδελφία (*philadelphia*), φιλόστοργος (*philostorgos*), and φιλοξενία (*philoxenia*) – vv. 9, 10, 13.
2. Words for "bad": πονηρός (*ponēros*), κακός (*kakos*) – vv. 9, 17, 21.
3. Words for "good": ἀγαθός (*agathos*), καλός (*kalos*) – vv. 9, 17, 21.
4. Paul returns to ideas later in the passage that were his focus in its earlier verses, e.g., the way the initial imperative call for love is expanded in vv. 9-13.

The text flows from idea to idea. Considered within the context of chapters 12-15, it is apparent that the two parts of the passage emphasize different aspects of Paul's exhortation.

1. Verses 9-13 expand the thought begun in vv. 3-8; they "are directed more to the internal relationships within the body of Christ" (Dunn, 738).
2. Verses 14-21 transition to a focus on the wider world's reaction to believers and how they are to relate to the world; they set the stage for 13.1-7.³

In summary, the 13 verses do form a series of exhortations — 19 of 36 verbs⁴ are commands, and not until v. 19 does he stop using imperatives in favor of indicatives. But, the effect is that of a flowing commentary on what has preceded. To paraphrase vv. 4-18:

You are a body with many gifts and a mutual responsibility to one another. Use your gifts for God, understanding that you are to be loving, hating the evil and clinging to the good, outdoing one another in showing honor, never being lazy in zeal, continuing to be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord, rejoicing in hope, enduring in tribulation, continuing in prayer.

Bless the ones who are persecuting you; bless and do not curse; rejoice with the rejoicing, cry with the crying, regarding one another in harmony, not with arrogance, but associating with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own view of yourselves; paying back no one evil for evil, but regarding good in the sight of all people, if possible, being at peace with all people.

Social Transformation

This text illustrates a major New Testament idea: Salvation is social.

1. In vv. 9-21, Paul uses the reciprocal pronoun, "one another" (ἀλλήλων, *allēlōn*) three times (10, 16).⁵
2. But it is the verbs that really show the social aspect of these verses: 25 of the 36 verbs are plurals, including 20 of the 21 participles.

Paul has no view of a strict individualized salvation or sanctification, as already seen in vv. 4-8.

1. Holding to true beliefs matters, but the church is not a collection of individual "members" (in the sense of the contemporary on-the-church-roll type member).
2. Therefore, church membership does not consist of a group who agree to meet together because each affirms certain basic beliefs, but the members collectively comprise an integrally connected body where we mutually encourage and draw strength from each other.

That has always resonated with people (we are created as social beings), but it especially resonates in our current setting where so much emphasis is placed on getting along.

We don't just have something to say to society; we have something to show: an exemplary model society. But we will do this only if we understand the other key component here.

An Ethical Society

Peter Kreeft recalls C. S. Lewis's illustration of morality's chief concerns. He pictured a convoy of ships that needs to work together to arrive at its destination. Three things must occur.

1. They must know how to cooperate and not get in each other's way (social ethics).

2. Each ship must remain shipshape and seaworthy (individual vices and virtues).
3. Most important, all must know their mission, why they are at sea (the greatest good).

As Kreeft observes, “Modern morality usually concentrates on social ethics, tends to forget individual ethics, and almost always ignores the question of the greatest good of all.”⁶ That is especially true in our society where so much emphasis is put on getting along and tolerance.

Romans 12.9-21 is an ethics text that illustrates Christianity’s different way. Michael Weed has written an excellent short summary of this vital difference.

Although moral considerations varied among the Hellenistic religions of the first century, it is fair to say that morality did not play a major role in the common religiosity of the period. Christianity (and Judaism) differed markedly in this regard. Christianity made exclusivist claims and called its members to follow a rigorous and distinct way of behaving. Conversion was not simply a matter of participating in a rite of initiation and accepting certain traditions. Rather, conversion involved a fundamental alteration in one’s basic perception of reality, in one’s values, and in the structure of the self.⁷

Notice these big ideas:

1. Christian faith, even with its social component, cannot be separated from morality.
2. The Christian standard is high: the example and way of Jesus himself (see Rom. 12.1; 1 Cor. 11.1; 2 Cor. 3.18; 1 Pet. 2.21-25; etc.).
3. Acknowledging that we need and can keep receiving grace should not be used to excuse a relaxed commitment to reach for the lofty standard of Christ.

Conclusion

Elsewhere, Paul called the Philippians to account for self-centered strife that was causing their church problems. He pointed them to the standard of Christ, urging them by his own commitment to keep striving “toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3.14; see vv. 13, 17).

Can society be better? It really does depend on us. Will we remain committed to Jesus and model what is possible?

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Notes

¹ Some would point out, correctly, that the Bible teaches that we will be rewarded for doing God’s will. But, is “reward” being used in the same sense? Are we called to live because of the reward or is it the consequence of right living?

² See James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988): 737.

³ Verses 15-16 seem to break this pattern with injunctions specifically to the church, but the break may not be as sharp as it first seems. We will look at this more in a lesson later in this series.

⁴ Excluding the two infinitives in v. 15.

⁵ Paul used ἀλλήλων 40 times. Acts uses it 8 times, the general epistles use it 16 times, and Revelation uses it twice. It appears 37 times in the Gospels.

⁶ Peter Kreeft, *Making Choices: Practical Wisdom for Everyday Moral Decisions* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1990), 77.

⁷ Michael R. Weed, “Evangelism, Ethics, and Eschatological Existence,” *Christian Studies* 19 (1989): 48.