



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Transformed Empathy

Romans 12.15-16

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### *Introduction*

Our text is part of a section of Paul's discussion of the transformed living-sacrifice life in which he teaches how to respond in a world that does not understand and sometimes attacks Christ's followers. As previously studied:

1. 12.14-18 states the general principle for responding to persecution: bless the persecutors.
2. 12.19-21 states the general principle on judgment and payback: it's God's place.
3. 13.1-7 applies that principle to the specific matter of the believer's responsibility to government, ordained by God and his servant to avenge evil.
4. 13.8-14 returns to the call to love and to be light in a world of darkness.

We took note of three big ideas in 12.14-13.14:

1. God's way trumps all other ways — always.
2. God's way leaves judgment or payback in God's hands — always.
3. God's way calls us to do good and reject evil — always.

Verses 15-16 present a puzzle in the section: it appears Paul has digressed, returning to his one-another emphasis of vv. 9-13 (the pronoun ἀλλήλων (*allēlōn*) is used in vv. 10, 16). Verses 15-16 do speak of body life, but they are not a digression from his teaching on dealing with a hostile world. Instead, they state an application of the one-another principle to hostile circumstances.

We are to empathize with those who struggle — and those who don't.

### *Empathy in All Circumstances (12.15)*

Empathy involves "the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner."<sup>1</sup>

1. This is different from *sympathy*, which denotes "an affinity, association, or relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other."<sup>2</sup>

2. The difference is this: “. . . *sympathy* implies sharing (or having the capacity to share) the feelings of another, while *empathy* tends to be used to mean imagining, or having the capacity to imagine, feelings that one does not actually have.”<sup>3</sup>

What if some fellow believers were facing hard times, but others were not? What if some who struggled were Jews and others were Gentiles? Or vice versa? Verse 15 answers

1. To deal with weeping first, it is easier to steer clear of those in trouble (particularly if identifying with them might get us into the trouble). Paul declares that body life should not work that way.<sup>4</sup>
2. On the other hand, he also warns against the tendency in which we turn out in force when there are trials, but are not so quick to celebrate with the good fortune of a brother or sister. Again, body life should not work that way.

### *How To Become Empathetic (12.16)*

Empathy does not come naturally or easily, even in societies not as self-absorbed as ours. (If it did, we might not see so many admonitions in Scripture to love one another, practice brotherly love, etc.)

Paul’s teaching shows us that it’s less about doing than being. When certain traits become part of us, the spiritual outcome will be the practice of empathy.<sup>5</sup>

1. “Living in harmony with one another.”
  - a. NASB is better: “be[ing] of the same mind toward one another” (τὸ αὐτὸ εἰς ἀλλήλους φρονοῦντες, *to auto eis allēlous phronountes* [participle]).
  - b. It could be translated, “to think the same thing.”
  - c. “Paul is certainly not calling for rote uniformity of thought, but for a common attitude and purpose.”<sup>6</sup>
  - d. “At the same time we should not weaken its force too much: Paul would want Christian congregations to decide as far as possible by consensus, *by seeking the mind of the Spirit on matters affecting their life and worship together* (cf. 1 Cor. 2:16; 6:5; 7:40; 14:37-38), even if in matters of personal lifestyle different views and practices were quite acceptable (see chap. 14)” (Dunn, 746, emphasis mine).
2. “Do not be haughty [in mind, NASB]” (μὴ τὰ ὑψηλὰ φρονοῦντες, *mē ta hypsēla phronountes* [participle] (echoing the humility principle we saw in 12.3).
  - a. The idea is to not cherish proud thoughts, not be self-wise.
  - b. This fits a theme developed throughout the letter where Paul urges both Jews and Gentiles to not claim a more favored status based on the presumption that somehow God cares more for them than for others (see Rom. 2.17-20; 11.18-20).
  - c. Such pride is an obvious problem for empathy.
3. “But associate with the lowly” (ἀλλὰ τοῖς ταπεινοῖς συναπαγόμενοι, *alla tois tapeinois synapagomenoi* [participle].
  - a. The key word is ταπεινός (*tapeinos*), a Jewish idea denoting “someone or something servile, menial, petty, and base” (Dunn, 747).
  - b. In Jewish thought, God is characterized precisely as the one who chooses and favors the *tapeinos* (Judg. 6.15; Job 5.11; Pss. 10.18; 18.27; 34.18; 82.3; 102.17; 113.7; 138.6; see Luke 1.52; Jas. 4.6; 1 Pet. 5.5).

4. "Never be wise in your own sight [estimation, NASB]" (μὴ γίνεσθε φρόνιμοι παρ' ἑαυτοῖς, *mē gínesthe phronimoi par' heautois*).
  - a. The use of the plural pronoun *heautois* may indicate that Paul has in mind "corporate self-esteem" (Dunn, 747), perhaps another nod to the Gentile-Jew tension; the application for us would be the "competing congregation" mentality.
  - b. Whether that is the idea or not, he again keeps the focus outward: the best way to treat fellow body members empathetically is to stop thinking too much about ourselves and think as servants.
  - c. NEB: "do not keep thinking how wise you are."

### Exhortation

Verses 15-16 are not a digression from dealing with a hostile world to a navel-gazing body life. They call the body to be mutually supportive in good times and bad, fully identifying with one another.

This, too, is living-sacrifice, transformed living. How are we doing?

1. Are we of the same mind toward one another, or haughty in mind?
2. Do we identify with the humble, the lowly?
3. Are we putting more stock in God's wisdom than our own?

Only as we let God transform us in these spiritual traits will we come to rejoice with the rejoicing and cry with the crying.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> "empathy." *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (11 October 2018).

<sup>2</sup> "sympathy." *Merriam-Webster.com*. 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (11 October 2018).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> The background of Romans probably includes Claudius's banishment of some Jews from Rome (cf. Acts 18.2). There is debate about how extensive this ban was (see Paul J. Achtemeier, Joel B. Green, and Marianne Meye Thompson, *Introducing the New Testament: Its Literature and Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001], 302-305), but it is evident from comparing Acts 18.2 and Romans 16.3 that at least some Jewish Christians were displaced. Paul's teaching in 12.15 would apply to such a circumstance.

<sup>5</sup> I choose "spiritual" here as opposed to "natural" in light of 1 Corinthians 2.14-16. While I believe that as we grow spiritually, certain traits will become more comfortable or natural for us, those traits are not "natural" in the sense of being inherent to who we are "in the flesh" (to use Paul's phrase). They are learned outcomes of embracing the spiritual life in Christ (see Mt. 11.29; Eph. 4.20).

<sup>6</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 746.