

ROMANS 12–16

In Romans 12–14, Paul sets forth some basic standards that all faithful people are to keep in order to be preserved either as a remnant or a grafted branch of the house of Israel and to receive salvation through Jesus’s new covenant. The works-oriented content of these three chapters dispels any modern doctrinal misunderstandings that Paul believed or taught the notion of salvation by mere grace or faith alone. Paul sets forth in chapter 12 the rules of life in Christ; in chapter 13, he treats the need to obey leaders and to love one another; and in chapter 14, he discusses the requirements to judge not or to not cause a brother to err. In these chapters, Paul quotes several rules or commandments given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, including the commands to “return not evil for evil,” “love your enemies,” “pray for those who persecute you,” and “judge not.”¹ That text quickly became a foundational covenantal text in the earliest decades of Christianity. Paul quoted these words of Jesus, clearly assuming his readers knew that text and already considered it as normative for righteous living and salvation.

Romans 12:1–8. Ways to Show Gratitude within the Covenant

“So we being many people are one body in Christ, each body part complementing each other.” (Romans 12:5)

The figure of the body as a unity made up of various members occurs frequently in ancient literature. The best-known example of it is probably the parable of the belly and the limbs, in which the limbs complain that they are the only parts of the body making an effort. They stop feeding the stomach, and after a time they are weak and realize that their nourishment and strength came from the stomach and that thus they were there to strengthen each other. In the early days of the Roman Republic, Menenius Agrippa is said to have used this

metaphor to persuade his soldiers, who had withdrawn to a sacred mountain and were planning to start a new city of their own, to return to Rome.² All members of a community, like the organs of a body, are needed for the body to function properly.

Paul then goes on in verse 6 to explain how God bestows different obligating gifts, known as *charis* or grace, upon different members of Christ's body or Church (compare also 1 Corinthians 12). These gifts bless the whole body and are reciprocated by all members of the whole through gifts of service. These special, relational gifts of service are to encourage serving, leading others, and showing mercy. These gifts, including prophesying and teaching, are all given to perfect the worship and ethics of the Church. Other gifts—ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, ruling, and showing mercy—are more practical and are introduced with terms such as “let him serve” and “if one is a good teacher, let him teach.” Where these relational, ministerial gifts are present, teachers should cultivate their teaching gifts for sharing the gospel. Usually, teachers are few in number as compared to the other obliging gifts mentioned in this passage.

Romans 12:9–16. How to Love One Another

Romans 12:16 reads, “Esteem each person the same, not being conceited but associate with those who are of low status. Do not think you are better than them.” The participle *phronountes* means “thinking,” but it also has dozens of similar nuances. Here it means “esteeming” in a positive context in contrast to the King James Version's “mind.”³ This principle seems to be modeled on Proverbs 26:12: “Seest thou a man wise in his own conceit? there is more hope of a fool than of him.” Harmony proceeds from a common goal of serving others with charitable desires for the temporal and spiritual welfare for a brother—just like one's own family. It is likely that some less charitably minded members of the Church, like their aristocratic Roman contemporaries, sought to associate only with those who could bestow certain fortunate gifts or higher positions on them. Instead, Paul taught that disciples should associate with everyone not just to receive benefits from others but to serve and thereby develop love for them through relationships while realizing that all are children of God. Therefore, no one should consider themselves better than anyone else.

Romans 12:17–21. The “Do Nots” of Love

Romans 12:20 states, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty quench his thirst, for by doing this you will heap coals of fire upon his head.” The integration here of the wider Near Eastern textual and literary tradition utilized by Paul cannot be underestimated or overemphasized. In this verse, we see a Greek rendition of Proverbs 25:21 from the Septuagint, which echoes an Egyptian ritual that entails *symbolically* pouring hot coals upon the heads of one's enemies. This is also the pattern found in the penitential Psalms. “Standing with burning coals on one's head is attested in an . . . Egyptian text as a ritual of penitence and is therefore to be understood in Proverbs 25:21–22 as ‘a picture of remorse.’”⁴

Paul is recommending not Stoic passive resistance to hostility but the Old Testament treatment of an enemy in order to help him overcome evil through positive charitable action, as the next verse suggests.⁵ Jesus invited His disciples to “love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). The blessing of loving those who are hard to love is that we will become special, favored children of our Heavenly Father (5:45). In addition to this principle of overcoming evil with God, Joseph Smith added, “A man is his own tormenter and his own condemner. Hence the saying, ‘They shall go into the lake that burns with fire and brimstone.’ The torment of disappointment in the mind of man is as exquisite as a lake burning with fire and brimstone. I say, so is the torment of man.”⁶

Romans 13:1–7. Obedience to Authorities

The Greek in Romans 13:1 can be understood as saying, “Let every soul be obedient to the higher authorities for there is no authority except from God. The leaders have been ordained by God.” The Joseph Smith Translation states, “There is no power in the church except from God.” While the verb *hypotassesthō* could refer to being subject unto, it often means “to be obedient,” emphasizing that one has agency and a personal choice to follow the higher authorities.⁷ “As a Christian, Paul acknowledges the Father as the source of all the welfare, prosperity, and peace brought by human civil rule. He thus states the reason for such obedience. This is fundamentally an Old Testament teaching.”⁸

With respect to authority, this section of Paul’s epistle to the Romans is clearly informed by the setting in Romans 11 of covenant Israel. “What Paul teaches in this passage has to be understood against the background of the Old Testament itself, in which Israel was instructed, especially in the time of the exile, to respect governing authorities, even to pray for them: Jeremiah 29:7 ‘Seek the welfare of the city to which I have exiled you and pray to the Lord on behalf of it, for in its welfare will be your welfare.’”⁹ “It was standard teaching in Judaism that God ordained civil governments. Many Old Testament and Hellenistic, Jewish sources suggest God ultimately rules over rulers.”¹⁰ While God’s work is going forward in a fallen world, He has a will for the world’s leaders who have been invested with power in other New Testament writings to keep the structures of law and order upheld (Luke 12:11; Ephesians 1:21; 3:10). First Peter 2:13 was traditionally applied to the king as a superior monarch. In the ancient world, it was believed that kings spoke directly for God, as we will also find in the next world.¹¹

In the *eschaton* (the final event in the divine plan), the divine authority that was given to the nations will return directly to God’s sovereignty and rulership, and the congregation of God will bring the nations to God’s truth and the faithful will rule directly over them (Revelation 20:4–14). Jesus answered in John 19:11, “Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore, he that delivered me unto thee hath the greater sin,” subtly suggesting God’s approval of the principles of fairness, justice, mercy, and judgment associated with traditional Roman authority.

The Lord stated in Doctrine and Covenants 58:21–22, “Let no man break the laws of the land, for he that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land. Wherefore, be subject to the powers that be, until he reigns whose right it is to reign, and subdues all enemies under his feet.” We can also see this principle in the twelfth article of faith: “We believe in being subject to kings, presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law.” Intensive government persecution was the setting of both Paul’s and Joseph Smith’s statements regarding respecting the law of the land, and perhaps it influenced the change in the Joseph Smith Translation to state that there was no “power in the church except from God.”

Romans 13:8–14. Serve Others and Awaken Spiritually

In Romans 13:12 we read, “The night is over, day is approaching, so let us put away the deeds of darkness and let us put on the armor of light.” The theme of darkness contrasted by armor is found in Isaiah and expanded in Paul’s epistles to reflect the ultimate protection provided by armor in Roman warfare.

We read in 1 Thessalonians 5:4: “But ye, brethren, are not in darkness, that that day should overtake you as a thief.” Paul seems to be paraphrasing Isaiah 59:16–17: “And he saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor: therefore his arm brought salvation unto him; and his righteousness, it sustained him. For he put on righteousness as a breastplate, and an helmet of salvation upon his head; and he put on the garments of vengeance for clothing, and was clad with zeal as a cloak.” Likewise, 2 Corinthians 6:7 reads, “By the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.” Most famously, Paul says the following in Ephesians 6:10–18:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might. Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness; And your feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace; Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

Finally, 1 Thessalonians 5:8 reads, “But let us, who are of the day, be sober, putting on the breastplate of faith and love; and for an helmet, the hope of salvation.”

In Roman times, armor was not put on or worn at night. Roman soldiers needed daylight to put on this heavy armor. They trained with their body armor to form a *testudo* or a tortoise formation. In this formation, all soldiers wore all their armor and locked their shields together. The soldiers on the outside of the formation made a shield wall and those on the inside placed their shields above them. This formation protected everyone in it from serious injury, and along with other military innovations, it contributed to the Roman army's conquest of the entire Mediterranean. Images of medieval knights engaging in hand-to-hand combat do not depict all the reasons why one needs to wear all the armor: to protect oneself but also to protect everyone else in the formation. Likewise, by keeping all the commandments, each person is protected by all the others as they gather to Zion and enjoy spiritual protection in mortality and emerge victorious in the celestial kingdom.

Romans 14:1–6. How to Succor the Weak

In Romans 14:3, Paul sets forth a key principle of Church membership: “Let the one eating not dismiss the one not eating, and let the one not eating judge the one eating for God the Father helped him.” Similarly, we read in Colossians 2:16, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days.” At this juncture here in Romans 14, Paul reminds the members of the congregation that it is God who welcomes all the Saints. God has received these Saints in Jesus's new covenant, and therefore there is no superiority between those who eat meat and those who have a vegetarian or other dietary lifestyle.

Among the Gentiles in Paul's day, some groups would fast on a given fast day as practice of asceticism. For example, in the first century, Seneca was influenced by Neo-Pythagoreans to become a vegetarian in his younger life, although he did not remain a vegetarian. Another example is Plutarch, who wrote an essay entitled *On Eating of the Flesh* that urges the Gentiles to consider Plutarch's reasons for vegetarianism. He mentions cultic rituals and denial of pleasure, antiluxury, health, and avoidance of cruelty to animals as well as the belief in the transmigration of souls.

We cannot be absolutely sure which specific Jewish and gentile groups had influenced the small, Christian congregation of Rome, but we can be sure that a broad spectrum of beliefs like this existed on a wide scale and was found in Rome. In the Jewish diaspora, fasting was encouraged on special occasions to serve as penance for some sins.¹² Various kinds of ritualistic ascetism existed in both Jewish and Gentile economies in the first century.¹³ Later in the chapter, Paul indicates that those weak in their commitment to any aspect of the gospel should be accommodated so that they will grow to become strong and mature Saints. Members of the Church today need to be accepting of differences so as not to discourage anyone who is traveling along the covenant path.

Romans 14:7–23. We Must Help Our Brothers and Sisters

Romans 14:13 can be rendered, “Let us not judge each another, but decide this instead, to not place an obstacle or trap for one’s brother.” The verb *krinōmen* means “to judge” (as in the King James Version) in the sense of deciding who is right or wrong, which, without the gospel, unfortunately entails usually deciding against others in favor of ourselves in a zero-sum situation.¹⁴ Fortunately, Jesus and Heavenly Father will judge all people justly. Only occasionally throughout mortality do disciples need to make righteous, intermediate judgments. Unfortunately, many judge others as they project their own sins on others instead of repenting. Disciples are able to fix only their own flaws, not those of others. Elder Dallin H. Oaks gave six guidelines for how to judge correctly: we can know our judgments are righteous if they (1) “refrain from declaring that a person [is] assured of exaltation or . . . irrevocably bound for hellfire”; (2) are “guided by the Spirit . . . , not by anger, revenge, jealousy, or self-interest”; (3) are “within our stewardship”; (4) include “an adequate knowledge of the facts”; (5) are not about people but rather about situations; (6) and “apply righteous standards.”¹⁵

Romans 15:1–13. Acceptance of All

Focusing on Romans 15:3, Paul states, “For Christ did not please [serve] himself, but as it has been written, ‘The slander of those that criticize you, fell upon me.’” The verb *ēresen* usually means “to please, satisfy, or appease,”¹⁶ but here, “to serve” is perhaps the best rendering because it also involves pleasing, satisfying, and appeasing others’ needs and wants. Thus, in this verse we read, “For even Christ did not please [‘serve’ or ‘gratify’] himself [a loose quotation of Psalm 69:9] but it was written ‘the reproaches of those who reproach you *fell on me*.’” That detail is also found in ancient enthronement ceremonies, in which kings were mocked on behalf of the nation, who the kings hoped would obey their edicts. The combat ritual showed how the king was willing to be mocked and scourged on behalf of the nation he served, or he was not worthy to inherit the throne as an agent and on behalf of the deity represented. Likewise, it was for our benefit that Christ suffered, and as we then model Christ’s death, burial, and Resurrection, we too model this righteousness as an example to the unbelievers. Pelagius, a faithful early Christian (ca. AD 400), wrote, “An imitator and disciple of Christ does not seek his own advantage. Christ died for the salvation of others and bore the most bitter reproach. . . . But whatever insults are cast, not only upon Christ but also upon the saints for God’s sake, are cast upon God himself.”¹⁷

Romans 15:14–33. Paul’s Apostolic Commission

In Romans 15:26–27 Paul highlights, “For Macedon and Achaea considered it right to make a certain donation for the poor saints in Jerusalem. For they approved, and they are their debtors. For if the Gentiles have benefited by their spiritual traditions, then they are obligated to serve them in temporal

matters.” Throughout Romans 15, Paul elevates the Greek concept of gift giving, or *charis*, raising it from a secular obligation to an ecclesiastical duty to assist others, particularly through making donations. Paul remarked that the converts at Macedonia and Achaia were not only pleased to give donations to the Christians at Jerusalem but, in fact, owed it to them because the Macedonians and Achaians had been the first to be given the obliging gift of the gospel. Gerald W. Peterman explains that “Paul considers the gospel to be a gift which brings about an obligation of gratitude in the form of a material return,” and in Romans 15:26, Paul confirms that he “has a special relationship with the Philippians as a result of giving and receiving.”¹⁸ Paul demonstrated reciprocal gratitude to God by caring for his converts as parents care for their children, and he congratulated fellow Christians for giving generously to each other. Like proper gentile parents who were expected to become the bedrock of their children’s physical existence, education, and general well-being, Paul became a great benefactor to his converts and occasionally received reciprocal blessings in return from them. As an outstanding missionary, he assisted his converts so they could get on the path to eternal life by accessing the *charis*, or obliging gift, of Jesus Christ. These converts were blessed by the reciprocal relationship created by Jesus’s atoning gift, which they had cultivated with God the Father, Jesus Christ, and Jesus’s servant Paul, all of which motivated them to give to other Saints in Jerusalem.¹⁹ Paul reflects on the many facets of the Christian communal effort to provide relief to the Saints in Jerusalem, an effort that formed a three-way reciprocal relationship among the Pauline communities, the Saints in Jerusalem, and Christ.²⁰

Romans 16:1–19. Concern for the One

To conclude the epistle, Paul says, “Welcome kindly one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ welcome you kindly” (Romans 16:16). “Paul closed his greetings with the instruction, ‘Greet one another with a holy kiss’ (v. 16). This ancient practice was a regular part of the worship service in the early church (1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians. 13:12; 1 Peter. 5:14).”²¹ Paul admonished church members to greet one another with a holy kiss, which was a Jewish practice adopted by Christians.²² This is still performed by the Coptic church, which is practiced mainly in Egypt. In other liturgical traditions, members pass expressions of peace.²³ The holy kiss demonstrates solidarity with all Christians became a regular practice in Christian worship.²⁴ The earliest Christian reference to the “kiss of peace” is in Justin Martyr’s *Apology* 1:65, which could have referred to a part of the sacrament service.²⁵ However, another scholar transposed the custom of the holy kiss into a contemporary Western setting by saying, “Have a hearty handshake all around,” while affirming that “kissing as a form of social respect and regard, at greeting or parting, was widespread throughout the Orient. Mark 14:45; Luke 7:45; 15:20; and 22:48 indicate that it was customary among Jesus’s contemporaries and disciples as does Acts 20:37, for Paul.”²⁶ During this time in Rome, “senators were greeted with a kiss—a Hellenistic custom indeed, but one already current among the elite in Cicero’s day (see Cicero, *Atticus*, 16.5.2). Nero is said to have denied the kiss to all

senators on his return from Greece: this was a powerful mark of imperial displeasure, not an attempt to reverse the assumption that senators were entitled to this mark of intimacy.”²⁷

Notes

- 1 Matthew 5:39, 44; 7:1; see Romans 12:14, 17, 20; 14:10.
- 2 Livy, *History of Rome*, 2.32; Plutarch, *Coriolanus*, 2-4; see also similar example in Plato, *Republic* 462c-d; C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1975), 617.
- 3 Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. ed. (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1996).
- 4 Peter Stuhlmacher, *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, trans. Scott J. Hafemann (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 198. Stuhlmacher is quoting the notable work of H. Rinngren.
- 5 See 2 Kings 6:22. See also 1QS 10:17–20; 9:21–22; 1:9–11; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 658.
- 6 *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1938), 357.
- 7 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*.
- 8 Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 667. See 2 Samuel 12:8; Proverbs 8:15–16; Jeremiah 27:5–6; Isaiah 45:1; Daniel 2:21, 37; 4:17; Sirach 4:27; Wisdom of Solomon 6:1–3. Josephus ascribes the same teaching to the Essenes: “For not apart from God does anyone rule.” Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2.140.
- 9 Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 65. See also Baruch 1:11 (“Pray for the life of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon”); 1 Maccabees 7:33. Compare *Ep. Arist.* 45; Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2.195–198; Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.65–78.
- 10 Colin G. Kruse, *Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 493. See Proverbs 8:15–16; 21:1; Jeremiah 27:5–7; Daniel 2:21; 4:17, 25, 32; Wisdom of Solomon 6:3; Sirach 10:4; Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, 2.140.
- 11 Charles Hodge, *Romans* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1993), 359. See Revelation 5:10.
- 12 See 4 Ezra 9:23–25; see also the Testament of Ruben 1:9–10 and the Testament of Judah 15:4.
- 13 John C. Brunt, *Romans: Mercy for All* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1996), 241–242.
- 14 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*.
- 15 Dallin H. Oaks, “‘Judge Not’ and Judging,” *Ensign*, August 1999, 9–12.
- 16 Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon*.

- 17 Pelagius's Commentary on Romans, quoted in Gerald Bray, ed., *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 354.
- 18 Gerald W. Peterman, *Paul's Gift from Philippi: Conventions of Gift Exchange and Christian Giving* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 175.
- 19 Philemon 19; 2 Corinthians 6:13; Peterman, *Paul's Gift*, 199–200; James R. Harrison, *Paul's Language of Grace* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 342.
- 20 Romans 15:25, 28, as quoted in Stephan Joubert, *Paul as Benefactor: Reciprocity, Strategy and Theological Reflection in Paul's Collection* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 133. See also Joubert's discussion on this topic on pages 139, 140, 200, 202, 216; and Richard R. Melick Jr., "The Collection for the Saints: 2 Corinthians 8–9," *Criswell Theological Review* 4, no. 1 (1989): 97–117.
- 21 Robert H. Mounce, *Romans* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 277.
- 22 James Robinson Boise, *Notes, Critical and Explanatory, on the Greek Text of Paul's Epistles to the Romans* [. . .], ed. Nathan E. Wood (New York, NY: Silver, Burdett, 1896), 136.
- 23 See 1 Corinthians 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14.
- 24 Karl P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1977), 165.
- 25 Mounce, *Romans*, 277.
- 26 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1–8* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 898–899.
- 27 Suetonius, *Nero*, 37; Andrew Wallace-Hadrill, "The Imperial Court," in *The Augustan Empire, 43 BC–AD 69*, ed. Alan K. Bowman, Edward Champlin, and Andrew Lintott (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 283–308, esp. 291.

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